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In December of 2002 the harness racing industry was shocked to learn of the sudden death of Chris Van Bussel the leading force behind one of Canada's most successful breeding operations, Seelster Farms. He was only 61 when he was taken by a brain aneurysm.

One can only imagine the turmoil that the family members, particularly his wife Cathy, went through in that period. Some wondered if Seelster Farms would be able to carry on.

But carry on it has. Not surprisingly, the family rallied and from all appearances never missed a beat. It was almost business as usual but there is no denying that there is a different look today.

It's a total team effort that keeps things humming along. The day to day operation is managed by Chris and Cathy's daughters Ann Straatman and Karen Favacho with cousin Tina Marie Howard and her husband Joel Howard. There is no question that it is a family affair.

The group met to discuss these developments and the future of Seelster Farms with **The Harness Edge's** publisher Harold Howe. Photo by Jim Gillies

For clarification purposes exactly who is Seelster Farms now?

Ann: That is an easy question. Maybe it is easier to start of with who Seelster Farms was.

The farm was started back in 1965 by our grandfather Frank Van Bussel who had 12 children. It started as a hobby that kind of got out of hand (the farm not the family). The kids had bugged their dad, our grandfather that they wanted a horse to ride. He was a smart man and thought they would soon get tired of riding this horse so he wanted to have a horse with papers. Then when they got sick of the horse he would be able to sell it easily.

It just so happened he got a mare that was Standardbred registered and they did get sick of riding her. But instead of selling her, they bred her, raised and trained the offspring. He got another few mares and found that it was too expensive to drive to the United States to breed them so they found Scarlet Wave, the first stallion that they stood here on the farm. It just kind of snowballed from there.

It was started by my grandfather and was continued on by four siblings in the family, my dad Chris and Tina Marie's mom, Tina Van Bussel, and our uncles Jim and Gerry Van Bussel. Jim retired almost five years ago and Uncle Gerry retired this year, so now remaining on the farm is my mom who has taken over my dad's shares of course, and Tina's mom, my Aunt Tina.

Aunt Tina is still very much involved in the farm. She has handled the accounting and finances since its inception, so she has 40 years of running the finances for the farm under her belt. Although there has been a change in ownership, the four of us sitting around this table were always involved in managing it under our dad.

So who actually owns Seelster Farms?

Ann: Cathy Van Bussel and Tina Van Boxmeer.

What about the day-to-day operations?

Ann: What probably a lot of people did not know because dad was so very much in the forefront of Seelster Farms

and managed every single aspect of the farm was that we were all behind him. We were the wheels underneath pedaling away but he was steering us where we were going.

I always looked after breeding the mares, working with our veterinarian and working with people who bring their mares to the farm. Karen and Tina work very closely together, managing the mares on the farm. We have actually four farms here, three for broodmares, mares in foal and one farm for yearlings. Tina is a registered veterinary technician and she works very closely with our farm vet. The three of them are all on call during the foaling season and it is usually Tina who looks after anyone that is sick and who needs 24 hour care.

So it is compartmentalized.

Ann: It is very much. We have to do it that way. It is impossible for us to look after every part of it. I have to trust everyone to handle their part of the farm and they have to trust me now that I have



The Seelster team includes, from left bottom row, Tina Marie Howard, Cathy Van Bussel, Tina & Harry Van Boxmeer. Top row, from left, Karen Favacho, Walter Parkinson, Joel Howard and Ann Straatman.

Seelster Farms

taken on a more administrative role.

Who else is involved?

Ann: Operations – Joel Howard, Tina Marie's husband is in charge of anything non-horse but he also is our anchor for any bad yearlings or any mares that are difficult to handle. He also has the long arms for foaling with the strength and the length.

I am proud of the team that we have put together for foaling because with 125 mares that foal on the farm every year, I am happy to say that we have done a great job. The new foaling barn is a nice facility as well. That was dad's last project and it is really nice. It is set up just perfect for emergencies or anything, everyone has the room and the facility to get everybody out alive.

Why does Seelster Farms exist, a question that many operations in agriculture must ask themselves?

Ann: We all started working here, myself, Karen and Tina Marie when we were just kids. Every day after school when we were nine and ten years old we were always in the barn, always coming out to help. For all of us it has been for the love of horses. It is that joy to work here and we love what we do.

Anyone who is in the horse business knows that it takes a little bit of luck because there are so many things that can go wrong. Basically though it has been a labour of love for all us and it has been an exciting job to do and something that we find easy to put 100 per cent effort into.

Karen: I think that the reason we're here is to actually incorporate all the things that we think are strong into a job. We all went to university. Dad really pushed education, so we are all educated that way but we all love working outdoors and are very competitive. Horse racing is competitive so that fulfills that need and the breeding business is very strategic so you must plan things out.

We are constantly researching things to make sure that we are doing the best we can. Being that way it makes it all an intellectual challenge. This is not just a horse farm where you go out and get your wheelbarrow. It is a business that requires planning.

In agriculture there have been enormous changes in the last decade with

many people leaving the industry.

When Chris passed away was there any consideration given to closing down the farm?

Ann: Never. We are the next generation and the best thing is that we all get along. Dad always involved us in the planning part, especially the last few years. We got together for regular meetings, collectively made decisions on which mares to breed to which stallions, which mares we were interested in buying, and how much money we would spend on these horses so we were always involved in every aspect. Only now we have to work without a safety net. He was always there behind us to give us support and give us advice on what we needed to do and to help us learn from our mistakes.

You three girls were born into the family and the horse business. Was there ever any consideration when you were leaving school, that you would pursue other avenues?

Tina Marie: In my case the answer is no. It was always my intention to come back. Being a veterinary technician one learns a lot about small animals so working with my Uncle Chris and Dr. Stan Henderson expanded my knowledge about larger animals. Today we get a lot of students from Ridgetown College coming here to see this side of being a veterinary technician, how to work with horses.

Karen: Going through high school, the only things that I was ever interested in were very competitive things like sports. I did well in Phys Ed so I went to university and took Kinesiology. That is something I like to learn about, the body and how things work and so forth.

I never thought that I was going to go into a career of Kinesiology, it was just something I enjoyed, something to further my education. I knew always that I was going to come back to the farm. Something just kept pulling me back. I didn't want to do anything else. I have the schooling to do other things but this is just what I want to do.

Joel: I worked in construction for eight or nine years and during the night when there was a tough foaling I would get the call to come out. Even when Tina Marie and I were dating I would go and help. That is how it happened. We got

married. I think at the back of my mind, I wondered why would I work for someone else when I could use my own talents to better my own company.

One of the things that people will say when they read this, is it is interesting that it works because a lot of committee decision making does not work. Why does it work?

Joel: We all have our own autonomy, our own departments, we all trust each other and respect each other very much.

Ann: I think that we have worked together for so long, that we think along the same lines. We agree on what is a good horse. We agree if something is not working. We listen to each other and everyone gets the opportunity to say why they want to change something or why they think it is not working. We are always looking for a new way to do things. We research a lot, the internet is a good tool, we have had good people in the business who have helped us along especially in the last year.

Dr. Cal Stiller was always very close friends with my dad and he has been a good friend, and advisor. Bob McIntosh has been a big help to us and a support which was something that we really needed.

One of the things that people comment on about Seelster Farms is that everyone looks so young.

Karen: Well, at least I am being the youngest at 26.

Ann: I'd rather keep my age off the record other than to say I am a few years older than Karen.

I have been working on the farm since I was tall enough to look into the stalls. After university I started here full time and have done so ever since. It has been a hands-on learning experience so I have 20 years experience and probably 10 to 15 years working at top management level. So while there is youth, there's also experience.

Last year must have been quite a challenge. The loss of Chris must have been very traumatic. How did you manage to pick up the pieces and carry on?

Tina: You have to have a good staff, that while we were dealing with the tough times they were able to look after the farm. That just meant everything to us.

Chris Van Bussel



Ann: The most amazing thing was how the time just flew for us even though we were all grieving. When dad died we were at the beginning of a breeding season coming up, we had a new stallion, we had an overwhelming number of breeding applications with Camluck and a selection had to be made on those mares.

I helped dad do it back in 1997 which was the first year that we had to make a selection and the two of us worked together on it. I felt confident that I could do it again. We all have such dedication to the farm and to what we do that after dad died there was never any question of not doing it. It was so automatic for all of us to pull together and to get the work done. In a way, we did not really have time to grieve right after because we were so busy, we had so many things to do.

We sometimes tend to "over think" things and want to work everything out so that it will be exactly right. The fact was that we had to jump in basically without thinking and do what came automatically to us. It is something that made us really strong and we just went on instinct as we were taught by dad. I think that is what pulled us through. If we had to think about it too long or if dad had been sick before, and we had to go into it slowly I don't know, it may have been more rough.

Was there any thought given by any of you to working somewhere else to gain a different perspective on the operation of a Standardbred breeding farm?

Tina: I don't think so. We all had the same goal, so why would you go and work with someone else, your competition?

Karen: I find that Seelster Farms is unique. We do things with integrity, the way that dad had taught us to do things.

This is the way we do things, this is the way dad brought us up and how he taught us to run this farm. It is a huge operation now.

Ann: Although we are open to new practices and new ideas, we knew we did not have to change the fundamentals of what we grew up with and what has worked for the farm for more than 25 years.

Was last year a transitional year, or was it business as usual given the circumstances with nothing much really changed?

Ann: I found out how much dad did. We always joked and teased with him that he did not do any work around here. He played on the computer. We told him that he really didn't have a real job even though he supervised every aspect and he was always the go to person for the final word.

After his passing someone had to step in and answer the phone and talk to the clients on every call, that was important. Dad was very much involved in the harness racing community. It is funny, he did a lot of stuff that I never knew he did and it has been a huge load to take on what his responsibilities were plus the ones that we carried with us.

Dad was very hands-on in the collection of the stallions and he had done it for years and he was teaching the next generation how to do it. We watched it every day but Karen has taken over the actual collecting of the stallions and had to learn that.

Joel: The farm has grown so fast, since I have been here, by leaps and bounds.

This is my fifth year working for them and it has grown so fast, just like the horse

industry has grown.

Their father had it right. He knew what was going on. It was just an adaptation for Ann more so than anybody because she took over all of her dad's responsibilities more or less. The rest of us just carried on.

Chris was very much the face of Seelster Farms. He was the most visible member of the operation and was involved in many organizations, whether he wanted to be or not, but that is not the case for any of you at least not yet.

Ann: One of the things that we miss here the most is dad knew everybody. He knew everybody by name and everyone knew him. What we found the hardest is that we don't know all the people by face, to talk to and to know them as he did. We know a lot of people by reputation but unfortunately not yet personally. Over the last year we have met a lot of people but I think we still are relatively unknown.

Joel: There is an intent though. Just this past year was so hectic. There will be an attempt to join committees, but last year was the time to get ourselves up and running. Karen was going to go and do it, but it has been just a little bit too much too quickly right now. The following year we are definitely open to joining those committees and getting our faces out there.

Ann: We are active in the running of the Forest City Yearling Sale. We are shareholders in the sale and will continue on with that.

One of the reassuring things this past year must have been to see Camluck in the paddock. However, he is 17 years old. Has there been much thought given to what will happen when he is no longer the cornerstone of the operation?

Ann: Of course, we think about that and every day we are planning for not having Camluck here by the choices we make for buying new mares, selling mares and in our desire to obtain new stallions. We now have three unproven stallions in the barn. We hope to have success with each of them. It is still early in their careers.

Berndt Hanover's first crop is training this year and we have had good reports. Intrepid Seelster's foals are beautiful and difficult to tell apart from the Camluck foals. They look very much the same with

Seelster Farms

his spirit and attitude.

And then of course, there is our new stallion Western Maverick. Now it is just hope and wait to see how they follow Camluck.

While Camluck is the dominant pacing sire in Canada, there is fierce competition to displace him from competing farms. Will Seelster Farms be able to compete financially in the marketplace to pursue future stallion prospects in the vein of Bettors Delight or Art Major?

Ann: It is our intention to do that, absolutely.

Joel: When I look at what Armstrong Bros. did over the years, they focused on investing their money in their broodmare band. They were never noted for chasing the big dollar stallions to stand at their farm although they did invest in a lot of stallion shares. Last year when they announced their dispersal they stated that they had been spending over \$1 million a year since 1997 in broodmares. That is where Canadian breeders should be spending their money.

It's great to see horses like No Pan Intended come to Ontario but for my money I would rather see us put our money into the broodmares.

There is going to come a time when Camluck won't be standing at stud. When that time comes will you be able to or want to go after a big name replacement?

Ann: It is hard to know when a horse is finished his racing career if he is going to be the next best stallion in Ontario. We have had some good stallions come up here to Ontario like No Pan Intended that Joel mentioned.

Now he is a very accomplished racehorse but we won't know for years whether he is actually going to make it as a stallion. There has been a whole lot more stallions that don't make it than those that have been successful and maybe that is where a little bit of luck comes in.

Camluck, although he was a top horse when he retired from his racing career, we had no idea if he was going to be a productive stallion and things went our way right from the start. We have also had stallions here that haven't gone the way that we had wished and I think that is why we are always getting in new stal-

lions. This is the first year in quite a while where we haven't had any stallions coming in to the farm.

Getting back to the question, yes I believe we can compete and we absolutely want to compete at the top level but it is hard to know from racehorse to stallion what investment you need to get the right horse.

Joel: The Americans definitely have the resources and we would be just kidding ourselves if we say that we can go head to head with some of those larger farms to pay \$4 to \$5 million for a stallion. Even if we could I'm not sure that would be a wise choice for the program we're operating.

I am not saying that we are not going to look at it. Like Ann says, we are always going to be looking for new avenues and we are an aggressive bunch but we are also realistic too and the broodmares are the way to go. Armstrong had a formula that worked for years. You don't necessarily have to have another Camluck standing in the barn. We will just have to research and watch.

Ann: And reputation is important for a farm. We have a reputation for top quality management of stallions and of mares and I think that is an attractive thing. The management component is becoming so important in the horse business and we are in it for the long haul.

Coming back to the broodmare issue, you have made some changes there. One of the interesting things that people are talking about is your partnership with Glengate Farms for two mares. Was that a first?

Ann: That was a first. We are on the shareholders committee of the Forest City Yearling Sale and we were talking about going to the Harrisburg sale. Jim (Bullock of Glengate) had asked if we would be interested in sharing a couple of mares. In looking at that we thought that is one way that we could cut our costs and be able to buy a mare of high calibre and breed her to a top stallion which was our intention from the start.

One of the mares is staying at Seelster Farms and one is staying at Glengate Farm. One is being bred to No Pan Intended and the other is being bred to Camluck. We thought that would be a very economical way to cut our initial costs in half and still be able to produce a top yearling for sale in the fall.

How many new mares have you added in the last year and what do you anticipate for the future?

Ann: We always go to Harrisburg with a whole book full of horses to look at and in years past we have always come back with five to seven and dad went to a few other sales as well. We look at each sale coming up but we are not ones to spend the crazy amount of money that some people do in buying broodmares.

What is that number?

Ann: \$125,000 (US) and above is a lot of money to put out in the first year when you don't know how much you are going to get back. But we budgeted and spent nearly that amount at Harrisburg alone.

We had talked about this with dad, looking at our broodmare band and the need to cull the mares. We do this every year as an annual reduction of mares.

Joel: We noticed at least last year that there were not a lot of Canadian breeders investing in breeding stock so what we did looked good in comparison. Let's face it, the better mares are not getting less expensive. The economics make it difficult.

How many broodmares do you have now?

Joel: Eighty one mares.

How many acres does the farm encompass?

Joel: Just under six hundred acres and we do our own hay and straw. We cash crop as well. We are at our capacity, there is no more room.

What are you looking for in a broodmare?

Karen: Being as young as we are, we have actually had a lot of years under our belt in knowing what combination works for us and what makes a good broodmare.

Looking into the future, we are very plan oriented. We like to plan and we are in for the long haul. I think we are concentrating a lot on our broodmare band. We are getting a bit more aggressive that way. We see that the way to go is to seek out mares that we can breed to Camluck, one of the very best stallions in North America, while he is here.

How does Seelster Farms feel about the whole concept of embryo transfer and does it have a place in what you do?

Ann: We like to look at new things and this is something that we have not

thought about prior to now but is something we are going to try this year.

What will you say to the buyers who tell you they are not interested in looking at any embryo transfer yearlings?

Ann: People have their own feelings, like we have people who say don't show me any with white feet. There are always people who are going to have their own stipulations and we are going to offer them a variety of things. I believe we are going to use embryo transfer only when it is absolutely necessary.

All of you are living on the farm or adjacent to it so is it a problem that you simply cannot get away from the business and that it becomes a bit consuming?

Joel: I don't know if we want to go there. This is a discussion Tina and I have had more than a few times. Working together like we do the time just slips away and we don't get to do some of the things we've talked about doing. It is a tough challenge.

Karen: One thing we did this year was bring in Walter Parkinson as assistant farm manager and he's even younger than me. But he is very knowledgeable and was born into it. He has a degree from the University of Guelph in Agricultural Economics.

We think alike and he is someone that we can bounce ideas off and is the consummate pedigree guru, watching TRN and of course on **The Harness Edge** website every morning to start the day, you know, dysfunctional. But, he's a great, great addition to the team and helps share the burden.

Seelster Farms at one time owned the Forest City Yearling Sale in its entirety. Chris made several efforts to sell it, including to Standardbred Canada who passed on the opportunity. That has proven to be their downfall and a wonderful benefit to Seelster Farms who continue to have a stake in the sale through more good luck than good planning though.

Ann: Dad wanted it to continue. He had offers to sell it but they were from people who wanted it but weren't going to keep it here. He wanted a yearling sale where we could sell some of our horses closer to home.

How do you feel it fits in with what you are doing now?

Karen: Luckily, we had a sale facility available at the right time and at the right place. We are proud of what the Forest City has become. Dad was very proud of the Forest City Sale as well and was glad to continue it as we have.

We are working towards having it be the number one sale.

You don't think it is?

Karen: Oh definitely, but maybe higher than some of the sales in the States. There are some American clients who will come but ideally we would like to have the Americans flock here like they do for Harrisburg, that would be the ultimate goal. Aim to be the premier sale in North America, not just Ontario.

Joel: It baffles me that people think that they can go to the Harrisburg yearling sale, spend American dollars and get better value for the money than they can here at home. Sure there are some better pedigrees but we are improving and it does require a commitment from the Ontario breeders to sell better yearlings.

Do you all get up in the morning and enjoy what you do?

Joel: I remember Tina waking up at 2:30 one morning, because someone mentioned to her that there was a little hole in a stall, she was worrying about it. So she took off in her coat and her hat to check on it. I was just left shaking my head.

You have to enjoy your work if you are dedicated like that. We are all the same. Laying there in bed at night thinking about what we should be doing the next day. As long as we are making money and we are all happy I think that's the payoff.

I worked eight years in construction and it didn't begin to compare with this. Bear in mind I came in at its pinnacle with Camluck but it does take some long hours.

Looking ahead now, is it steady as it goes or are there some significant changes you want to implement?

Karen: I think we are planning towards a number of changes. I wouldn't say they are going to be the kind of changes that will lead you to write about it in your magazine. But I think slowly over the next year we will be constantly planning how to make it better, how to be the best.

Whether it be broodmares, farm structure, staffing, in every aspect we are always trying to do better and you are always planning on changes. I don't think you will see drastic changes in Seelster Farms but you will see change.

Why do you approach being in the agricultural sector with such relish?

Ann: It is easy for us in that we grew up knowing this. We came into it through its growth period, but now at the management level we are as big and as good as we have ever been. The formula for what we do is working and we can see the potential for years ahead.

This is a marathon rather than a sprint. You can't go at it as a sprint, because there are too many risks involved. In every mare that you breed you are taking a risk because you need to predict three years ahead what the clients are looking for. For two minutes in the sales ring you have got three years of planning ahead of time.

I suppose I'm repeating myself but this is what we were brought up to do, all of us. We love what we do so why wouldn't we want to do it? 🐾