

KEN IRVING

La creme monte toujours a la surface.

A loose translation of that French saying is, "the cream always rises to the top." And it most assuredly describes one of the most respected horsemen in Aroostook County—Ken Irving.

In the Maine Harness Museum/Exhibit located in Bangor City Hall, safely preserved behind a glass display case, are the original green and gold racing silks that Ken Irving wore some 53 years ago when he first appeared on the Northern Maine racing scene. Beside the soft hat and racing tunic is a gleaming trophy inscribed to Ken Irving as the winner in a free-for-all trot at Skowhegan Fair, with his first standardbred passion, a trotter named Lotta Song.

Irving, a Caribou native, has been a potato farmer all his life, now running a joint farm operation with his son, Bob.

By Ken Ward

As a youngster on a potato farm in Aroostook, horses—and their care—were a way of life for most, from sub-zero temperatures to hot summer days, they were the horsepower for the "spud" crop.

But Ken Irving received his Baptism of fire on the competitive racing circuit with a jolt. Sitting in the stands as a spectator with his parents at Northern Maine Fair, Presque Isle, the young 16-year-old Ken was asked by his Uncle Claude, with his parents' permission, to drive a rather balky pacer named Patricia Sunshine in the second heat.

His Uncle Claude had warned Ken that she pulled to the right real bad on the turns. Young Irving donned borrowed silks, took her around the oval before his family and a cheering hometown crowd and managed a third.

Determined to straighten her out, Ken worked with her that winter racing on the ice and the following summer, in a handicap from a standing start, Ken Irving rewarded the cheering crowd and himself, by ushering Patricia Sunshine to their first win.

Incidentally, two officials of that standing start free-for-all are legendary names in the standardbred sport. The late Ed Keller was the starter and Ted Gibbons of Portland was the presiding judge.

Once bitten, Ken Irving over the next two decades, kept racing, building, breeding and upgrading his stock until it was represented at each passing campaign and became a quality operation.

Ken's brother Dana, now a nationally established breeder in Pennsylvania, bought his first standardbred from Ken at Presque Isle. Ken sold him a pacer named Victory Bravo for \$100. His car loaded with luggage, four or five cats and tow-



TOM HENNESSEY

ing a horse trailer, Dana headed for New York—a move which was later to prove profitable in spreading the Irving name as a standardbearer of quality producers along the eastern seaboard. Last year, Dana Irving had a champion trotter, Butch Lobell in the prestigious Hambletonian, a far cry from a farmboy from Presque Isle.

Ken's son Bob joined his father as an assistant trainer while he was still in high school.

Bob Irving recalls, "Dad is a quiet man. He never seemed to enjoy the limelight, but when he spoke, it was just once, for he was the boss."

Some years ago, Ken entered into a partnership with Harold Glidden of Presque Isle to buy a horse. They went to the sales to buy a trotter, although over the years, the pacer has been the mainstay of the Irving Stable. Ken selected a

Veteran craftsman of harness racing

trotter, Tonia Hanover, which Harold didn't want, but Irving insisted that it had been the best horse he had seen that day.

His intuition and knowledge was vindicated when Tonia Hanover entered the blue ribbon classic in the harness sport, The 1960 Hambletonian Stake. In a select field of 19 trotters, Tonia Hanover, for an unheard of purse of \$144,590 at the time, gave Ken Irving one of the greatest thrills of his lifetime, finishing third in one heat.

Joined in his business by his son Bob, who not only showed a genuine interest for the sport, but exceptional ability, it soon became a father and son operation and remains that way today.

In 1967, the Irvings were searching for an addition to their broodmare band and bought a mare they had seen train and race at Presque Isle as a three-year-old, Jillana. The daughter of Shadow Wave, who paced as a three-year-old in

"You have to have a little ice water in your veins"

1:56.3, Jillana had paced in 2:11.2 and was away from Mitana, who held a three-year-old pacing mark of 1:58. Alvin "Red" Brewer had been racing Jillana for Norman "Chub" Gallagher and Ken Irving bought her. With the addition of Jillana to their broodmare stock, the best was yet to come for the Irvings.

Jillana has produced 12 foals in as many years and those foals have amassed some \$337,777 in total purse earnings. The first foal was Jill's J., not raced at two, who was sent through the Harrisburg sales and went to Canada, winning as a three-year-old in 2:09.3.

Next came a Harold J. progeny, Spud Express, the best Jillana ever produced, who bowled over all her competition at Brandywine with a 1:59 mile. The sub-two minute mile, the mark of excellence in the sport, was clocked by Spud Express three times in a 10-day span with a 1:59.2, 1:59.4 and 1:59.5.

See KEN IRVING on Page 20