

# River Run For Ryan

**MAINE MAGIC:** River Run For Ryan, owned by Marc Reynolds (black top, khaki shorts), is named after Ryan Hunt (in sulky seat) and has become a source of joy for the entire Hunt family, which also includes Ryan's mother, Marie (white jacket), his father, Jonathan (behind Marie), sister Jana (beside him) and brother Adam (grey and yellow T-shirt).



## Win One for Ryan

Pacer races for stricken youngster | by M. KELLY YOUNG

It's only in the movies where a chance meeting on an airplane changes your life, right?

Not if you're Maine native Marc Reynolds, who met a Midwest mom in his travels to the Lexington Selected Sale two years ago and almost immediately forged a connection with her family and her little boy, Ryan, who has a rare genetic disease.

Reynolds sat next to Marie Hunt on his flight from Bangor, Maine, to a forgettable connection city. As they hit cruising altitude, he flipped through his sale catalog as she stuffed fundraiser thank you notes with photos of her family. The conversation that ensued left such an im-

pression on the horse owner that he soon named a yearling he purchased later that fall after Hunt's young boy.

Now the 3-year-old pacing colt, River Run For Ryan, who was a \$2,700 purchase, has graduated from the Bangor Raceway circuit to compete under the big city lights at Yonkers Raceway.

"He has surpassed expectations, truthfully, and we're more than thrilled," said Reynolds, 39, who manages his stable of a half-dozen horses with his father, Jim. "It's a leap that horses generally can't make, going from racing at a cheaper track to going against some of the big boys and some of the major stables. He definitely surprised us, but we do feel like the con-

nection has a little bit to do with that."

Halfway across the country, that connection is something that helps Hunt get through all the ups and downs of her 8-year-old son's illness.

"It's been something fun for us to do on Tuesday nights," she said. "We look on the U.S. Trotting Association website and find out when he's racing. We're all huddled around the computer for it and we get Ryan up there and he giggles and watches," she said of the family ritual with her husband and two other children, Adam, 13, and Jana, 11.

Ryan has a rare genetic disease called Hunter Syndrome. It is one of several related disorders called Mucopolysac-



charidoses (MPS). Children with MPS conditions are not able to produce certain enzymes in their body which would normally break down and recycle material in their cells. As a result, there is a buildup in those cells, which causes progressive damage.

Hunter Syndrome is carried on the X chromosome and occurs in only 1 in 150,000 boys in the United States. There is no cure for the disease, but some treatments, such as enzyme therapy, can make the disease more manageable.

Since his diagnosis at age 2, Ryan has undergone numerous medical procedures, including surgery to implant a shunt to drain fluid from his brain, carpal tunnel surgery on both wrists, the insertion of ports to receive IV medication each week, tubes in his ears, and most recently, the insertion of a feeding tube.

Ryan's joints are affected by the disease, so he relies mostly on a wheelchair to get around, has hearing aids and is largely non-verbal. His central nervous

system and cognitive abilities are also affected. But even more difficult than the endless doctor and hospital visits is the knowledge that the family's time with Ryan will be too short. While the severity and symptoms of the disease can vary, children with a serious case may live into only their teenage years.

It is obviously difficult for Hunt to talk about this aspect of her son's health and she understandably gets choked up discussing what lies ahead. But that is why her family takes advantage of every moment.

"It's all in your attitude and how you look at things and we look at Ryan as a huge blessing in our lives," she said. "We just try to spend as much time and do as many things with Ryan right now as we can because we don't know what the future holds. We just take it a day at a time and enjoy what we have with him today."

**Hunt and Reynolds weren't even supposed to sit together on that memorable flight.**

"I was on a girls' weekend visiting with some family from Canada," said Hunt. "They had come down to Maine and I flew from Iowa to meet them. On the way home I ended up switching seats with a lady so she could sit beside her husband, so I actually got moved to the front of the plane and that's when Marc got on. He ended up sitting beside me and we got to chatting."

The Lexington Selected Sale catalog in Reynolds' hand started the small talk that would bring the two together.

"She saw that and it sparked a conversation that she had attended horse racing in Nova Scotia, where she grew up," Reynolds said. "She dropped a few names; she knew the Jamieson family and Carl and his brother and Jody. She was writing some thank you cards and she had some photos of her children enclosed. One of them I could see was a special needs child.

"This was the first time she had been away from her son, Ryan, overnight."

The Hunt family had just finished

hosting a 5K run fundraiser called the "River Run for Ryan," which raises research money for his disease, and she shared this story with Reynolds.

"I just felt a connection there of some sort," said Reynolds. "I'm from a close family and I have a sister that has three children that I'm very close to. But it just hit me how lucky I was that day. It put things in perspective for me and I kept thinking about it.

"When I was at the sale in Lexington, the whole time I'm thinking, 'If I do buy a yearling, I want to contact her and maybe talk to her about naming the colt after her son.' But that didn't happen until a

**"My husband and I just look at each other every once in a while and say, 'This is crazy! Who has a horse named after them?'"**

—Marie Hunt

couple of weeks later when I got back and actually purchased this colt."

Reynolds tracked down Hunt's contact information from the name of the fundraiser she had mentioned and asked for her and her husband Jonathan's permission to name the colt after their son.

"I was pretty touched that here was a little boy that he had never met and he saw a picture of him and it just touched him," Hunt said. "That really meant a lot to me because [the syndrome] is very rare and it's not a big interest to people. It just means so much to us that he cares this much for Ryan.

"My husband and I just look at each other every once in a while and say, 'This is crazy! Who has a horse named after

**FAST FRIENDS:** *Left to right:* Reynolds spends some QT with Ryan, whose story he learned by a chance encounter with Ryan's mother, Marie. • A \$2,700 purchase, River Run For Ryan has moved up from the Bangor Raceway circuit to Yonkers. • Although the Hunts live in Iowa, they have traveled east twice to visit River Run For Ryan and watch him race.



them?’ We know Ryan is special; he’s just such a blessing in our lives. He’s taught us so much and we’ve experienced so many things because of him.”

**Reynolds, a mortgage loan officer who also serves as a horse agent across the border into Canada, doesn’t typically purchase young horses. so he doesn’t have many naming opportunities. He competed primarily on the Maine circuit until branching out to New York and occasionally Pennsylvania tracks a few years ago, so his stable consists of mostly older horses and claimers.**

River Run For Ryan is only his fifth yearling and he’s never had much luck with them, including the only prior horse he named after a person. Unfortunately, his father’s namesake never made it to the races.

But his father’s lifelong interest in racing primed Reynolds’ own passion for the sport by allowing him to tag along as a youngster to the Maine county fair tracks. In his late teens, Reynolds bought his first horse and since then, racing has become a larger and larger part of his life.

“For us, being small-time people, this was a dream come true,” Reynolds said of his colt’s success. “It’s really for the wealthy people, the yearling game, but we decided to roll the dice and take a chance.”

That chance has so far paid off for

Reynolds. He purchased his Western Terror colt through an online auction by breeder Bulletproof Enterprises in Pennsylvania. He didn’t see the colt in person, but watched the video and talked to the farm manager in advance to cover his bases. But it was the dam, Color Spread, which convinced him he should purchase the yearling in the end.

“My dad’s always been a huge Abercrombie fan,” Reynolds explained, “and it’s obviously older blood now, but that’s

**“I think this horse has a purpose.”**

—Marc Reynolds

the major reason we bought this colt. I like Western Terror, but the Abercrombie mare was the main reason.”

Reynolds brought the colt home to the barn of his childhood friend and trainer, Shawn Thayer. Based on the horse’s size, they knew he would be better on half-mile tracks. They assumed he was not a sire stakes contender in Pennsylvania, especially since training would be hamstrung by the long Maine winter.

“We took our time and aimed to give him a little bit of education last year and then shut him down to bring him back safe and sound for this year,” the owner

said. “We liked what we saw from day one, so just managed him appropriately.”

River Run For Ryan had five starts and earned a mark of 2:00.3h last year at Bangor under Thayer’s tutelage.

“Shawn really deserves all the credit for developing this colt,” said Reynolds. “He had ‘Ryan’ from the time I purchased him as a yearling and really did a tremendous job in being patient with conditioning him.”

When the colt returned to Bangor this spring, he reeled off five straight victories and then shipped to trainer Heidi Rohr and Jim Nickerson’s stable in Saratoga, N.Y., to take a big step up to competition at Yonkers.

“He came to us in July and we just put him in our program and he adapted well,” said Rohr, who began her own racing career in Maine. “We didn’t have to change anything. He’s very sound and doesn’t even need a bandage. He really likes his job and loves to race.”

“His times in Bangor were good miles and we wanted to try him at Yonkers, but it was unexpected how good he was,” she said of the easy transition. In just his second outing at the metro New York oval, he finished second by a neck in 1:54. “I knew he would hold his own, but to go out that fast right out of the gate, that was amazing.”

Now the colt has won twice in conditioned classes at Yonkers with another



Maine native, Jason Bartlett, in the sulky. So far he has finished off the board this season only when he was sick in September and has earned a mark of 1:54.1h.

**River Run For Ryan and his namesake have met face-to-face twice.** The Hunt family visited Bangor last summer before the colt was ready for the races and then again this year.

“It was for his last race at Bangor,” said Reynolds of the most recent visit. “We don’t race for a lot up here, but we intentionally held him here because we knew that they were coming up on July 8. Everyone at Bangor, the race secretary and everyone else, was great about getting a race together on that particular day.”

According to Reynolds, meeting the entire family in person and getting to spend time with them has been the most rewarding part of this entire experience.

“Last year when they came here and met the colt in person, that was amazing,” he said. “They have two other children, and the oldest son, Adam, actually jogged the colt in the sulky with my trainer and that was the first time he had ever been hands-on with horses and in a sulky. That was really cool. This year took it even to a different level; I feel they really had a good time at the races and enjoyed being there first-hand.”

While Reynolds keeps the family updated on when the colt will be racing,

they follow his entries online and always watch his starts live, often texting Reynolds to comment after the race. They have even gathered fans who watch the colt live from Nova Scotia, where Jonathan Hunt’s parents live, and all the way on the other side of Canada in British Columbia, where Marie’s parents are.



To find out more about Hunter Syndrome or to support research, visit the National MPS Society at [www.mppsociety.org](http://www.mppsociety.org). The organization provides education and family support, and raises funds for research into treatments and a cure.

“We’re just so blessed to have Marc in our lives and this horse is just a really neat connection and something we enjoy so much,” said Hunt. “We appreciate and look forward to what the future holds. No matter what the horse does, we have this friendship between our families and we have this special bond through this horse. We’re connected now.”

Reynolds feels the same way. “I’ll definitely have a relationship with

them regardless,” he said. “They have actually invited me out to Iowa and someday I’m going to make it out there and go to a Big Ten football game, so that’s the next step.”

It’s easy to hear in the owner’s voice that his relationship with this family and knowing Ryan are emotional for him, and he confided that Ryan the horse will stay in his stable for as long as possible.

“I think this horse has a purpose,” he said. “My dad and I have discussed it; we’re blue collar people and it would have probably been advantageous for us to market the colt and I did have some interest, but it just wasn’t something we wanted to do because of this connection.”

A connection nurtured from a chance meeting on a plane to a successful yearling purchase and lifelong friendships, the story of Reynolds and the Hunt Family may actually be better than any Hollywood picture it seems to emulate. Especially when you find out that the colt’s original name was Rare Meeting.

“I never put any thought in it until after the fact,” said Reynolds. “When I was looking back I remembered his name and that’s another layer that makes this all so unique.”

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