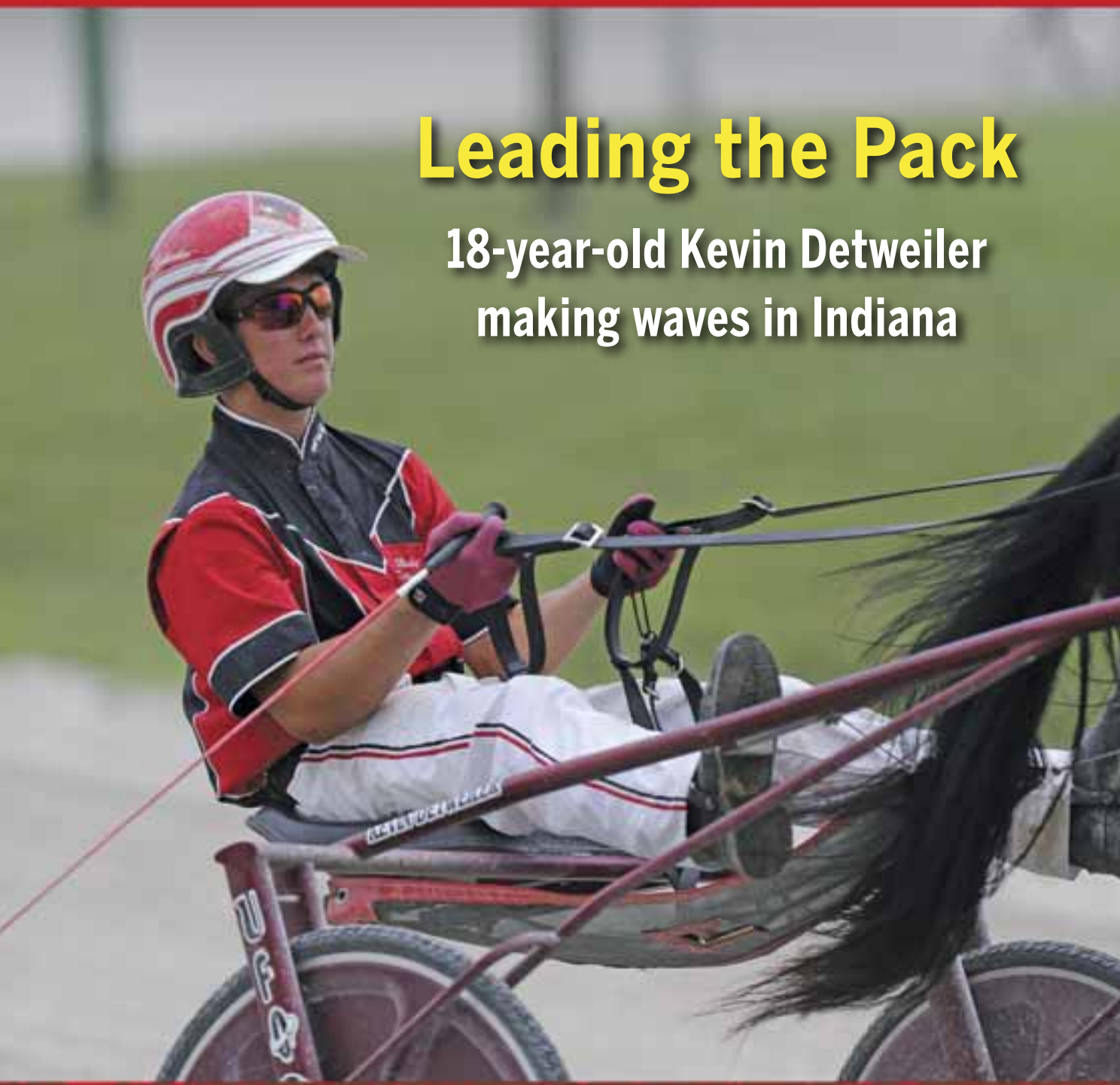
NOVEMBER 26

Youth Beats

The harness racing 'zine for teens



Leading the Pack

18-year-old Kevin Detweiler making waves in Indiana

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Youth Beats

18-year-old driving phenom Kevin Detweiler

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JAMES WITHERITE
Youth Beats editor

TREVOR EARLEY PHOTO

Letter from the Editor

When I started in harness racing 20 years ago, I cut my teeth calling races at county fairs in Michigan. Sure, it was a six-hour schlep from home to the closest of my stops on the circuit, but I gained the perfect foundation for everything I've done in this sport since. And, at a daily rate of $125 and a sandwich from the midway, it wasn't a bad summer job for a 20-year-old junior in college.

Fast forward to the present day, and my path has made its way back to fair racing. This summer was my first real exposure to the Indiana fair circuit — albeit through a control room screen 10 hours away — and I found myself pleasantly surprised by the quality of horseflesh and horsemanship all round.

One name that I found myself hearing a lot of was that of Kevin Detweiler, an 18-year-old driver embarking on his second season of competition. And I quickly got the feeling that three wins on a card was a subpar day for him. How good is he? I wasn't on the desk for the eight-race July 29 card from Connersville, Ind., but I could feel the energy from the Fayette County Fairgrounds through the production team group chat. Kevin had swept the first five races on the card, I read. Then the sixth. Then the seventh. OK, I had to tune in now. When Kevin won the final race with Larry King trainee Vel See You Later by a double-digit margin in 1:57.4, he completed an unprecedented sweep of the program! It was a highlight-reel moment in the making for the young reinsman, who has won 113 races and roughly $540,000 in purses this year through mid-October. If you boil it down to his 5% driving commission of $27,000, it's fair to say his summer job was way cooler than mine.

Regular *Hoof Beats* contributor James Platz shares Kevin's story in this edition of *Youth Beats*. I hope you enjoy reading about his path in the Standardbred industry as much as I have enjoyed watching his career blossom this summer. As always, thank you for your readership!

Cheers, James

A Road of Smiles

Pair of warhorses opening doors for young horsewomen

By Sarah Vejsicky

If you drew out a road map of your horse's life, how many stops would you know? Would you know who foaled them out? Who qualified them? How far they traveled? Would you know how they got from then to now?

For 14-year-old Blake Burnett, she knows nearly every step. Smiling Terror, affectionately known as "Smiley," came into Blake's life nearly a year ago through an unlikely set of connections, and a desperate need for a second chance.

Smiling Terror, a 14-year-old pacing gelding sired by Western Terror, had 231 lifetime starts and earnings over $270,000, and the fastest of his 37 career wins was a 1:52.1 mile at Scioto Downs, in Columbus, Ohio. His lengthy racing career spanned from 2014 all the way through 2024. He raced across multiple states, from Ohio to Pennsylvania and Michigan. For a yearling purchase price of $7,000 at the 2013 Standardbred Horse Sale, in Harrisburg, Pa., he certainly delivered a significant return on investment. In 2020, he was claimed by Roy Murphy Jr., who raced him until he was again claimed in late 2021 by new owners.

Enter Blake, a girl who grew up riding everything but Standardbreds with her mom, Shelby Emmons. Blake became involved in 4-H with Shelby as her adviser in the club "T-Birds," and it's there that she met 16-year-old Amelia Smith. The girls showed in 4-H together and became friends, bonding over their love of horses. Amelia's father, Randy Smith, trains and races Standardbreds at the Greene County Fairgrounds, in Xenia, Ohio. Blake started by cleaning stalls for him, and she soon caught the racing bug. Gradually, Randy started showing her the ropes when it came to jogging horses on the track. It was there that Blake started to love the breed and the thrill of exercising these athletes — and also where she got to know Roy.

Smiling Terror's last race was April 24, 2024, at Northfield Park, near Cleveland. A year later, he was found underweight, lame, and a shadow of his former glory. Thankfully, he had a Full Circle contact in his USTA registration. When Roy Murphy Jr. was contacted about the gelding needing help, he offered Blake the option: She could have this horse and rehabilitate him. Blake and her family did not hesitate to say yes.

A trailer went overnight to Pennsylvania to pick up Smiling Terror in September 2025, and he was immediately brought to the Emmonses' farm. He was in incredibly rough shape. For weeks, they did nothing except feed him, love him, and try to get him sound.

And he did.

"Smiley" gained weight. His feet were corrected. He got sound.

Then came the question of what was next. This was Shelby's first Standardbred. She had Quarter Horses, Arabians, and a variety of crossbred horses, but never a gaited horse. Smiley showed that he was up for a second career; he took all the riding in stride with Blake as his faithful partner.

He became a fearless trail horse, a "bombproof" riding partner, and well on his way to recovery. Before long, Blake decided to take him to some shows.

In fact, he made it back to the Greene County Fair — not to race as he had in the past, but to compete in pleasure driving, gaited English, and gaited Western classes. Blake has shown in a bit of everything, and she even just recently qualified and competed at the Ohio State Fair with her Appaloosa. Smiley may even make his State Fair debut next year with Blake. In the meantime, she plans on taking him to more open shows and also teach him to compete in trail classes.

Amelia is also making waves in the industry. Just recently, she got her qualifying and fair driving license, and her debut produced two second-place finishes: one in the Terry Holton Youth Driving Series at Washington Court House, Ohio, and one in the Spring Haven Ladies Driving Series at Marysville, Ohio. She made her first start on a pari-mutuel track on Aug. 1 at Northfield Park in another Terry Holton Youth Driving race. While she admitted she was nervous, all her nerves melted away once she lined up behind the gate. She finished fourth against some of her fellow young talent. Ironically, the horse she drove is named Smile Today — unrelated to Smiley by parentage, but nevertheless connected by the people in their lives.

Smile Today, a 2018 pacing gelding sired by The Panderosa, is another versatile warhorse who competes on the racetrack and in the show ring. At the Western Horse 4-H show, Smile Today won a trophy in the Western Easy Gaited class as well as a few other ribbons. Amelia takes a Standardbred every year, but "Smiles" might be her favorite. A few other notable horses she has taken include Hickory Icon, a gelding by Real Desire who racked up over $420,000 in his lengthy career; and Blue Boy Yankee, a Muscles Yankee gelding who made $72,000 and even had a brief stint racing under saddle. Amelia also shows a Quarter Horse named Hiding In The Dark in the ranch events, and he qualified her for the Ohio State fair in three events.

Looking ahead, Amelia's plans are to continue racing in the Spring Haven and Youth Driving series, compete during the fair, and expand her 4-H projects next year.

The roads that brought Smiling Terror, Blake, Amelia, and Smile Today together were anything but smooth and straight, yet each turn led them to the journey we all strive to take: a future built on second chances, friendship, and the shared love of these great horses. Smiling Terror and Smile Today's stories both show that the journey does not end when the race is called, nor when the class is placed. As for Blake and Amelia, they have a bright future ahead on their paths, driving, showing, and even raising calves. They are paving the future of this industry one drive, one ribbon, and one ***smile at a time.***

Golden Jubilee

Celebrating 50 years of the Harness Horse Youth Foundation

by Ellen Taylor

A dedicated crowd braved the cold and rain to attend the Harness Horse Youth Foundation's 50th anniversary celebration on Oct. 10 at the Stable of Memories, in Lexington, Ky.

Keynote speaker John Campbell emphasized the "love of the horse" and complimented HHYF on its existence and efforts for the past five decades.

HHYF president Tabatha DeLong thanked all partners, donors and volunteers for their continuing support, and executive director Ellen Taylor unveiled HHYF's newest resource, Discover Harness Racing, designed for FFA chapters and 4-H clubs as well as individuals.

Lisa Lazzaretto, author of *Bear's Big Race*, spoke about the origin of the book and her desire to"spread the excitement of harness racing" to a younger audience.

Marcela Riddick, who has attended multiple HHYF summer programs, was the lucky winner of the "Ride A Mile With Dexter Dunn" live auction item thanks to the generosity of Olivia Kimelman. The combined total of the live and silent auctions, along with the Daleville Elementary Art Club paintings, exceeded $2,500.

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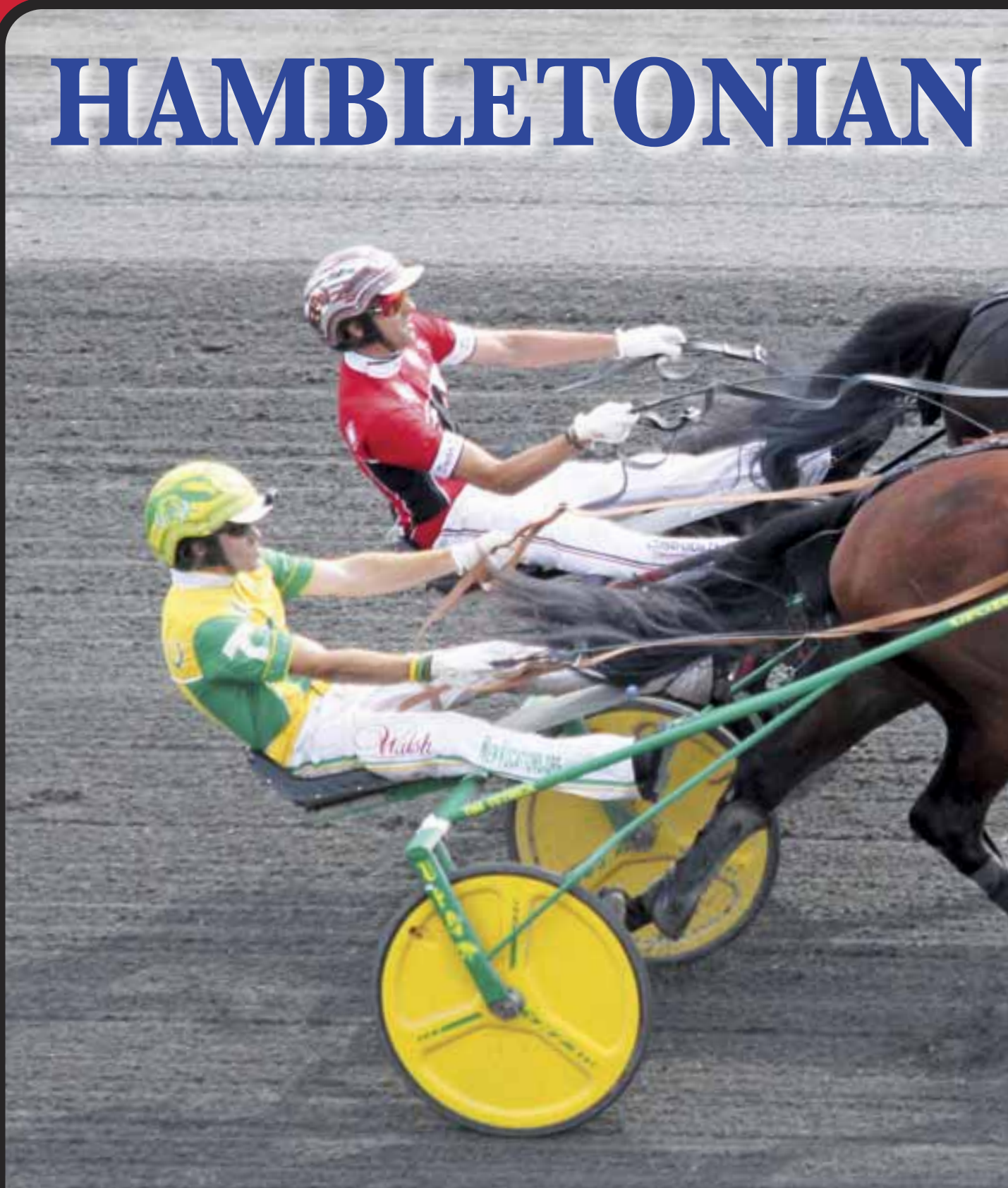
HAMBLETONIAN



Apex (3) wins the 101st Hambletonian at the Meadowlands defeating

PHOTO BY JAMES WITHERITE

Showdown

Big Ranger by a nose in a stakes and track-record time of 1:49.2!

HARNESS *Highlights*

HHYF's expanded 2026 programming yielded strong outreach

BY RACHEL LEONARD

The summer of 2026 was one of change for the Harness Horse Youth Foundation, as well as one of continued impact on the future of the Standardbred industry.

In January, Rachel Leonard joined HHYF as program coordinator. And with double the boots on the ground, HHYF expanded its outreach. The horses also experienced changes in their normal summertime routine being stabled at Leonard's farm with abundant turnout time. The summer was full of laughs, travel, learning, and so many new friendships.

HHYF introduced an estimated 1,200 new and inquiring minds to harness racing this year. The HHYF schedule was busy from mid-March to mid-October with school field trips, ag days, summer programs and expos.

HHYF started the season off teaming up with the USTA at Equine Affaire, in Columbus, Ohio, to bring awareness of harness racing to the existing equine community. HHYF added four new host sites to its summer programs this year: Winners Circle Training Center and the Troy Fairgrounds, both in Ohio; the Clinton County Fairgrounds, in Indiana; and Tioga Downs, in New York.

Leadership camp for more advanced students was once again graciously hosted by Harrah's Hoosier Park. Nine young racing fans attend the five-day, four-night camp and experienced all things harness racing. The race office and backstretch staff, judges, charter, starter, outrider, blacksmith, farm managers, veterinarians, and countless drivers and trainers volunteered their time and expertise to the aspiring horsepeople.

Long-standing hosts DeLong Stable, in Anderson, Ind., Goshen Historic Track, in Goshen, N.Y., and Gaitway Farm, in Manalapan, N.J., all participated again in 2026.

HHYF was excited to partner with Hoosier Park and the Indiana Standardbred Association to renew the Anderson Community Schools field trip for 400 fourth-graders (the first time since before COVID); to participate with Ohio Standardbreds & Friends at Breyerfest in their breed demonstrations; to assist the Hambletonian Society with Hambletonian promotion at the American Dream mall; and to continue involvement in Harrison County Ag Days for third-graders as well as at the national FFA convention.

HHYF's New Jersey camp, at Gaitway Farm, was one filled with tears of both joy and sadness. Longtime stable member Royal Attire — known as "Roy" — was officially retired from his HHYF duties. At 21 years old and after nearly two decades of service, he was ready for an easier life. Program attendee Delaney Spicer, daughter of horsepeople Veronica and Symon Spicer, was gifted Roy at the conclusion of the final day of the camp, much to her surprise. Reports are that Roy is thriving in his new life as a riding horse and pasture mate. HHYF is actively looking for a new Trottingbred to attempt to fill Roy's shoes.

HHYF would like to thank everyone who volunteered, hosted, and supported its programming during the 2026 season!

ON THE RISE

18-year-old Detweiler leads fair circuit in second season of racing

BY JAMES PLATZ I PHOTOS BY DEAN GILLETTE

The Indiana fair circuit has long been dominated by veteran trainer/drivers topping the standings. Leading reinsmen over the last two decades include the likes of Doug Rideout, Don Eash and Jay Cross. This season, however, a new fair champion has been crowned. Kevin Detweiler delivered the most winners of any sulky-sitter on the circuit, and he's just getting started.

The fact that Detweiler has emerged as the top driver on the circuit this season should come as no surprise. Racing enthusiasts that followed fair racing last season witnessed the young reinsman hold his own throughout the summer in his first season in the sulky.

"I've always wanted to drive horses," he said. "I just like working with horses."

Detweiler's father, Michael, has consistently participated on the Indiana circuit, both as an owner and occasional driver, racing under the banner of Black And White Stable. Detweiler has grown up around Standardbreds, and he helps train the stable-owned horses in the afternoons after working mornings for his dad's construction company. Now, he is driving the stable's racing interests in competition.

Detweiler's first experience in the sulky actually came in qualifying action at Harrah's Hoosier Park in November 2024. Then 16, he steered two horses during a session late in the season, finishing second with pacer Lucks On Time and third with trotter Prince Henry. He then qualified a handful of horses the following spring at Hoosier Park prior to the beginning of the 2025 fair season.

Once the fairs kicked off, Detweiler wasted no time reaching the winner's circle. His first-ever victory came in only his ninth start, over the Converse, Ind., fair track. Sitting behind the Jeffrey Stoll-owned sophomore trotting filly Chrome Rose, Detweiler wired the field and pulled away by over 9 lengths.

The young driver connected with Chrome Rose for six wins during the fair season. He also piloted sophomore pacing filly Roll-On Midnite to three wins and a third-place effort in the $25,000 Governor's Cup Championship at the Indiana State Fair.

"That's the horse that I always wanted to drive," he said of the Capt Midnight filly. "She just had the heart."

Detweiler also registered a runner-up finish with the Gerald Miller-trained Rita's Girl in the $25,000 Governor's Cup Championship for freshman pacing fillies. He finished the five-month fair season with 34 wins, ranking him

fourth in the standings behind leading driver Doug Rideout (89 winners), Clint Coy (61) and Mike Peterson (43).

"I didn't think I would get so many drives," Detweiler said of his first season of fair racing.

One of the trainers that used him often was his uncle, Joseph Wagler. As it turned out, Wagler proved to be a key to Detweiler's success in 2026. After displaying an acumen for finding the winner's circle in 2025, the driver immediately began scoring victories in bunches when the circuit commenced this June.

In the first round of action at Converse, in the northern part of the state, Detweiler piloted nine winners over two days. He returned a week later to drive five more winners at Converse, and when the circuit moved south to Corydon, near the Kentucky border, he collected nine more victories. Of those wins, 15 came aboard Wagler-trained horses. Wagler led all conditioners on the fair circuit in 2026.

That early momentum carried through the summer and dovetailed well with other success — and some milestones — away from the fairs. After turning 18 in May, he secured his "P" license and began driving in the Midwest. He picked up his first pari-mutuel win later in the month after three runner-up finishes. The victory came at Hoosier Park with the You Know You Do gelding HC Caviar, owned at the time by his father's stable. Detweiler needed only 15 trips behind the starting gate to score his first pari-mutuel win.

The upstart driver also collected his first Grand Circuit event in August at the Indiana State Fair, in Indianapolis. Detweiler guided Brookview Hershey to a 3-1/4-length triumph in a $12,913 division of the Hoosier Stake for freshman trotting fillies. Although he has regularly succeeded with horses from both gaits, the reinsman prefers the challenge of driving trotters.

Detweiler enjoyed a strong showing in the fair finals, reaching the wire first with a trio of trotters. He collected a Governor's Cup Championship with the Wagler-trained freshman trotting filly Cool Manner, who accounted for another eight of Detweiler's fair wins, as well as a triumph in September at Hoosier Park. He also claimed victory with the Robert Wyman-conditioned sophomore trotting filly

He started the program keeping freshman filly trotter Sassytemper in front by a neck, and rounded out the day in rein to 19-length winner Vel See You Later. In between, most winners crossed the finish in front by a comfortable margin.

Detweiler has tallied 89 wins on the Indiana fair circuit, nearly 30 more than his closest rival. It has been a meteoric rise for the budding sulky star.

"I never thought I was going to be where I'm at right now," he said.

Precisely, a horse he only guided one other time during the season, also producing a victorious result.

Detweiler rounded out the championship trifecta with family-owned and Leander Schwartz-trained sophomore trotting gelding Don't Tell Anyone, an eight-time winner in Indiana and near 16-length victor in the Parshall Stakes, at Greenville, Ohio.

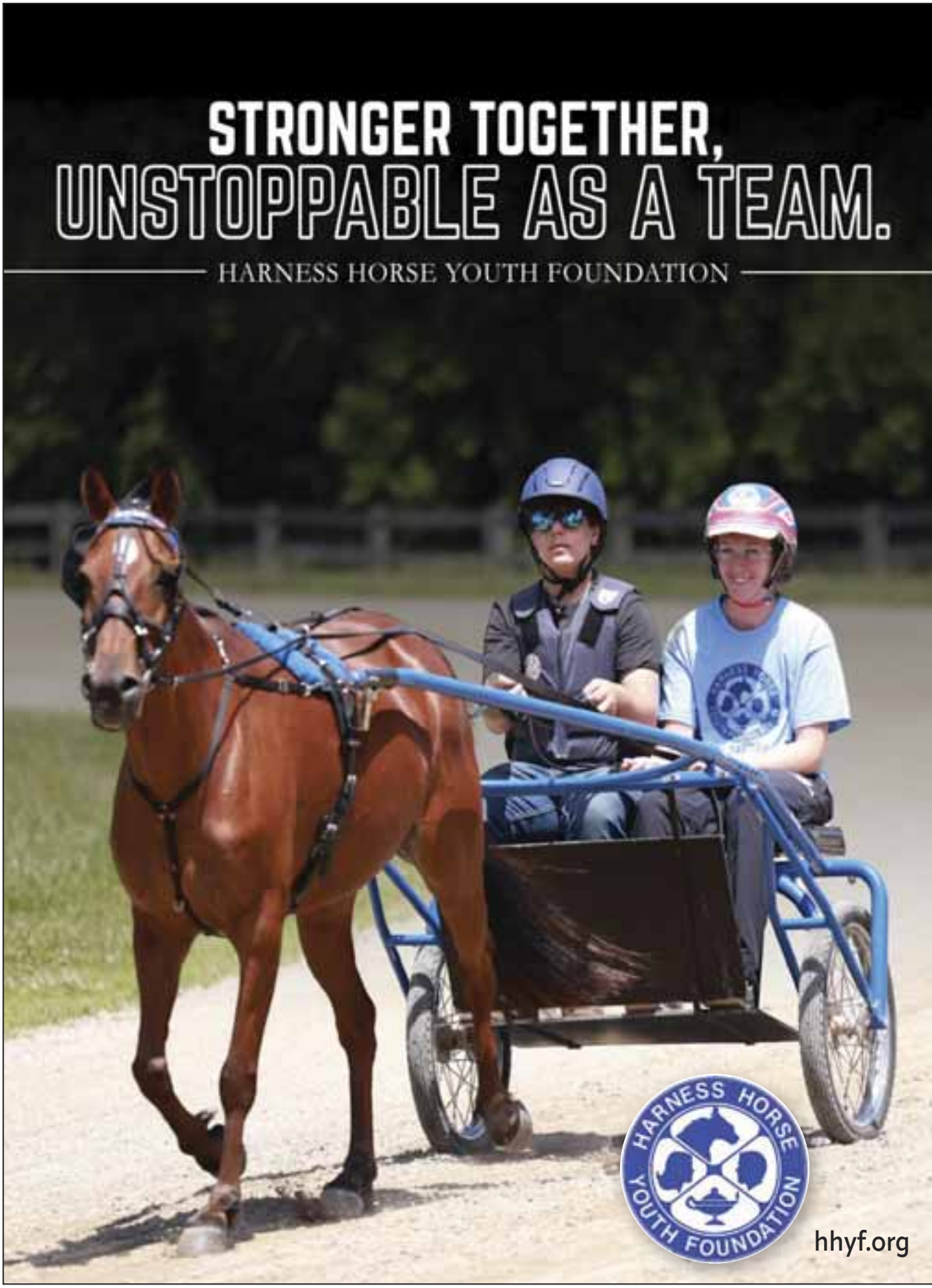
On July 29, at a fair stop in Connersville, Ind., Detweiler achieved a feat hard to replicate anywhere: He drove every winner on the eight-race card.

"I still can't… I still don't know how I did it," he said of the experience. "Some of them I figured I could maybe win if everything goes right, but I didn't think I was going to win all of them."

When combining his fair and pari-mutuel winners, Detweiler has registered 113 triumphs through early October, with 96 runner-up efforts and 67 third-place performances in 451 attempts this year. He has collected purse earnings of $538,624 while achieving a .418 UDRS.

With the fair season winding down, Detweiler finds himself busy breaking and jogging babies for clients. Most of the year, he works construction during the day. This time of year, his attention shifts to working with the next crop of pacers and trotters, as well as pari-mutuel racing in Indiana and Ohio.

"We've got a couple of them that we want to take over to Northfield (near Cleveland). And Joe's (Wagler) racing over there too right now," he said.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