

FOUR FEET & A HEARTBEAT

STORY & PHOTOS BY RACHEL OENEMA

TROOPER: *A brave, courageous, and persistent individual who does not give up in the face of adversity.*





Just outside of Woodstock, Ontario, nestled in the rolling hills of Zorra Township lies the little village of Embro. Though the size of the town is small, the events and festivities held here often outdo a large city. The Thistle Theatre, Wienerfest Home County Festival and the Embro Fair and Tractor Pull are just a few of the well known events hosted by the community.

Embro is also the home of the McNiven family which consists of Rob and Tammy and kids Maddi, Jenna and Robert, who have been involved in the standardbred industry for decades. Twinbrook Farms, an accredited breeding farm who has produced the likes of Twin B Playboy (p,1:53.2f; \$799,028), Zooka (p,1:49.3f; \$1,363,813), Twin B Warrior (p,3,1:50.1f; \$717,711), Twin B Champ (p,3,1:50.4s; \$437,235) and Roll Away Joe (p,1:50.2; \$570,295) just to mention a few, is owned and operated by the McNivens.

With another exciting foaling season wrapped up in 2019, the family welcomed some more potential stars into the Twin B dynasty this spring with foals by sires such as Bettors Delight, Betting Line, Fear The Dragon and Father Patrick, all coming into the world at Twinbrook Farms.

But there is one foal in particular who stands out the most, and he's suitably named, Twin B Trooper.

The son of Bettors Delight - Burnett Blue Chip, 'Trooper' was born on April 26th around 9pm. However, as Burnett Blue Chip was giving birth the umbilical cord (which is supposed to come with the end of the foal) was coming out with the head. The now forward-facing cord became pinched, due to its position, causing all oxygen to be cut off to Trooper as he was being born. With immediate attention to the severity of the situation, Rob, Tammy, and Jenna all worked diligently to get Trooper out of his dam, alive.

"As we were trying to get him out, he hip-locked on the mare," recalls Jenna who then explains 'hip-locking' to be when the foal's hips lock onto the mare's pelvis, causing difficulty in delivering the foal. Now, not only would Trooper be without any oxygen, but he was also stuck inside of his mother.

"We couldn't do anything but pull to try and get him out, and by the time we did get him out he wasn't breathing. His eyes were open but he had no reflexes, but if you held

your hand to his chest you could feel a heartbeat," says Jenna, who puts in endless hours on the family farm and works closely alongside her father with hopes of someday taking over the business.

In a bit of a panic, Jenna covered one of Trooper's nostrils, breathing into the other, while her mother Tammy performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation to keep the foal's heartbeat going. Meanwhile, father Rob grabbed a resuscitator device. With the resuscitator now over the foal's nose, the team of McNivens pumped air into him in an attempt to get him to start breathing on his own, in what would seem like hours going by. "We kept taking the mask off to see if he was breathing, and at times he was faintly breathing on his own but we didn't know if that was going to be enough, so we continued pumping air into him and called our vet - but we didn't think we were going to save him," Jenna says, in a sad tone, in which you can still hear the fear and the devastation in her voice.

The vet's recommendations were medications that were not on-hand at their farm - medications that wouldn't be commonly found on any farm. With few options left for the fate of Trooper the vet suggested one last thing - whisky. "The vet asked us, 'Do you have any whisky in your house?' We did, and so he instructed us to give the foal a few cc's of whisky orally."

Whisky, like any other type of liquor, has a



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JENNA AND TROOPER DURING HIS STAY AT THE OVC IN GUELPH

biphasic effect on the body, meaning it affects the body in two different phases. The first phase the body experiences is stimulating, causing you to feel more awake.

Within a few minutes Trooper's breathing improved and showed signs of being responsive. "It could have been a fluke. I don't know if it was the whisky or the fact that we were still resuscitating him but either way he started to blink his eyes, and his breathing became a bit stronger," Jenna says in a much more joyous tune.

But Trooper was far from being in the clear.

Trooper's mother 'Burny' was as calm as can be throughout the entirety of the situation. The brown mare with a star on her forehead, the same as her newly born foal, patiently watched as the McNivens tried to save her baby. "She never got in our way or made us nervous. She knew something was going on." Jenna credits the mare who has now had six foals.

With Burny closely watching the McNivens tending to her foal, it was evident to them that the foal had to be sent to the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph. Trooper was wrapped in blankets to keep him warm as Jenna rode in the trailer with him and the mare, and he was checked into the clinic before he was even two hours old.

Upon his arrival, Trooper was hooked up to oxygen and fluids while vets conducted multiple tests and an ultrasound on the colt's lungs. What gave the family the most hope was that despite his traumatic entrance into the world, his lungs tested to be in good shape, and in the face of it all, that was enough hope to leave Trooper with the team at the OVC and continue praying for his strength.

Within the first couple days of his stay at the OVC, Trooper was diagnosed as a 'dummy-foal' and was placed in neonatal care where someone would be with him at all times, both day and night. A dummy-foal is a foal who exhibits abnormal, vague behaviour or neurologic signs such as sleepiness, seizures, weakness and loss of suckle reflex during their first few days of life. Trooper also remained on oxygen and a feeding tube.



23-year-old Jenna, who amidst everything else she had going on, visited Trooper every day at the OVC and never thought twice about making the one hour trip from Embro to Guelph. "The first night I went to visit him they had him laying on a mat... he was trying to get up and had the will to get up but he just didn't have the strength to do it on his own... at one point they had to tranquilize him to keep him from moving too much and hurting himself, and they would use towels and blankets under his limbs to support him in standing on his own. They would do this about every two hours."

Still trying to stay hopeful, Trooper's condition the following day was anything but optimistic. "I visited him for two hours that day and he never got up or hardly moved at all. All he did was sleep. He didn't have any life to him at all." The sound of devastation starts to filter back into her voice as she talks about the foal she had already grown so close to.

Trooper only had the strength to stand for about five minutes with the assistance of the veterinarian technicians before he would need to lay down again. He was still being fed through a feeding tube and still hooked up to

oxygen. It didn't appear that Trooper would possess the skills needed in order to survive, leading to a discouraging phone call from Dr. Dan Kenny, the vet assigned to Trooper's case.

"The vet called mom and dad saying that his kidneys were failing and that it would soon be time to make a decision [on his life]. I was visiting him at the time they called my parents and mom said to come home because there was a possibility he may have to be put down that night."

After deciding to keep trying to save the foal, by days three and four Trooper's kidney levels showed some improvement, but the foal himself wasn't showing any significant signs of getting better or showing life. "I prayed and prayed that someone would just give us a sign if he was going to be okay or not. It was once again getting to the point where his quality of life was in question and a decision would have to be made again."

That next morning Jenna found the sign she was asking for. "I found a dime on the barn floor while I was sweeping. We sweep our barn every day and no one really comes in here with money or anything. So I knew it meant something." Finding a dime is said to

be a form of communication from someone that has passed on letting you know you are not alone. It is also said to be a sign of guidance or validation that you are on the right path or a sign that positive changes are afoot; a reward or token of approval from beyond.

Whether it be a coincidence or not, that night the McNiven's received a phone call that although Trooper was not yet strong enough to stand completely on his own, when the vets assisted him in standing and his mom approached him, he started to nurse from his mother despite the fact he was still hooked up to a feeding tube. Trooper had never been taught to nurse or been bottle fed. Alas, this was the first sign in five days that he showed signs of comprehension and life.

With the good news, came more bad news. Trooper's roller coaster ride continued when vets discovered that he had a small hole in his bladder which had allowed infection in, to eat away at the bladder membrane. Once again the McNiven's were faced with another decision.

"The vet said that we pretty much had two options: do the bladder surgery or put the foal down. We have a lot of faith in Dr. Kenny and have known him for many, many years. He said that he felt he would have a good chance if we did the surgery. They figured that this [bladder issue] could have been what was holding him back all along. It was possible that he may have been born with this issue but it's not 100% certain," recalls Rob, who, with faith in the team at the OVC made the decision for Trooper to undergo the surgery.

Jenna and mother Burny then played the waiting game while Trooper underwent more than four hours of surgery that was needed to repair his damaged bladder. Although the surgery went as planned, the days following the procedure left Trooper to be tired and motionless. "The vet said that anesthesia is a lot harder on a dummy-foal than it is on a normal foal... he didn't want to get up, whereas before he always had the will to try but he just didn't have the strength."

One more prayer for Trooper to come around.

On the eighth day of Trooper's stay, Jenna's daily visit would prove to be the best one

yet. "I had to FaceTime my parents because when I walked in he was in the stall standing up by himself. He no longer needed neonatal care. He walked right over to me. I guess he just needed a day to sleep after the surgery," beamed the girl who has loved horses her entire life and has always devoted her whole heart to them.

From that day forward Trooper showed his family, at Twinbrook and the OVC, promising improvement, and the talk of him finally getting to go home was in the air. "He got to the point where he was so happy to be able to stand on his own that he didn't want to lay down. He would be so tired but refuse to lay down, he is just a fighter."

On Monday May 6, Trooper and his mom made the trek back home after a 10 day stay at the OVC. Although he had to be on stall rest for 30 days, Trooper would get hand-walked every day, and he had begun to pick up some traits on how to be a horse. "If we were grassing the mare and she would go down to have a roll, Trooper would copy her and have a roll himself, he would call out to the other foals and follow the dogs around. He would knicker to everyone. He is just a happy-go-lucky little man... he loves life," explain Rob and Jenna with priceless smiles on their faces.

While still on the road to recovery, Trooper faced yet another setback after being home for about a month-and-a-half. Whether it be from a weakened immune system because of his complications at birth, or a lack of colos-

trum from the restricted amount of milk he was allowed to have during his stay at the OVC, Trooper found himself in the midst of an intestinal infection and faced a bad bout of diarrhea. This caused Trooper to become dehydrated, and although the breeders were doing their part by running fluids and antibiotics into him, the precautionary decision was made to take Trooper back to the OVC to avoid taking any chances on their newest member of the family.

During his second stay at the OVC, Trooper received constant fluids and antibiotics to help overcome the diarrhea, and after spending five days at what would seem like his second home, Trooper came back to Twinbrook Farms where he has been living life to the fullest as a normal foal ever since.

It's not hard to tell how much Trooper loves Jenna, she is the pinnacle of his attention, and wherever she goes he is sure to be right behind her. It would be hard to determine who loves who more, when you hear the way he knickers to her and when you see the smile on her face anytime she talks about him or sees him. There's that old saying that "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man," or girl, in this case.

The McNiven's have given it some thought as to whether or not to sell the colt in the 2020 yearling sales. Although Burnett Blue Chip never made a pari-mutuel start herself, she has produced some quality prog-



eny. Her second foal, Everyone's Watching (by Artiscape) has bankrolled over \$114,000 with a speed badge of 1:52.4s, while her current three-year-old, Twin B Watching (by Sunshine Beach) has a mark of 1:51.3s and over \$63,000 in earnings. Her 2019 two-year-old Twin B Watch Me (by Sportswriter) was an impressive 1:55s winner in his qualifying debut and finished second at Mohawk in his first lifetime start.

The lineage of strong pedigree doesn't stop there for Twin B Trooper, as his second dam, Cheer Me Up, is the producer of foals with earnings of more than \$1.7 million - she is also the third dam of Hes Watching (p,3,1:46.4; \$1,129,215). Trooper is just one of numerous Bettors Delight grandchildren descending from Cheer Me Up, and with a resume like such, one could foresee him bringing a hefty yearling price.

"We may never sell him as a yearling, I don't know if Jenna could handle that," laughs a father who is so proud of his daughter. For more reasons than one, Twin B Trooper could be a lifer for the McNivens. "He's tough, there's no doubt about that. He has the will," says Rob. "There aren't many people who would have done what we did to save him, simply because it's not feasible."

With Trooper's foaling issues and the complications he has faced thus far in his life, if you saw him in a herd of foals you would never know anything ever happened to him. "Lather Up had foaling issues and issues along the way [see the July, 2018 issue of *TROT*] and look how he turned out," grins Jenna, "You never know what can happen. A story like Lather Up's gives you hope. Without hope you don't have much. He's perfectly normal and right on track with the rest of the foals. There should be no setbacks and we'll just take care of him."

If there is anything the McNivens take from everything they have experienced with Trooper, it would be the importance of being readily available when it comes time for a mare to foal. "Some [mares] don't have a problem, but if you do have a problem and you're not there, there's nothing you can do to save them. Had we not been there when Burny foaled, we wouldn't have Trooper today.



One trip to Twinbrook makes it beyond clear how much the McNiven family loves their horses, and the time and dedication they put into their successful operation.

From the second Trooper came into this world he never quit fighting, and the McNiven family never gave up on him either. For ten days while Trooper fought to stay alive in neonatal care, Jenna never gave up on him. She never missed a night to visit him, wheth-

er it was after a long night of racing or a family event, she always made a point to check in on her boy.

You could be facing the lowest of lows, in life, in this business, or in any other, but regardless, you have to have hope. You have to have the will to fight, the will to never give up, and you have to be fearless. You have to be a trooper. **T**