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A DEFINING MOMENT



As John Bax prepares to take Define The World to Europe to compete, he reflects on his two previous trips and how they've changed him and the way he trains horses. By Heather MacKay Roberts

"It is truly the experience of a lifetime," said Peterborough, Ontario-based trainer John Bax as he describes what it is like to take a horse to compete in Europe and in one of the most prestigious trotting events in the world, the Elitlopp at Solvalla Racetrack in Stockholm, Sweden.

Few people are able to have an experience of a lifetime more than once, but for Bax it will be three times later this month

when his stable star Define The World represents Canada overseas in the Grand Prix in Norway and then the Elitlopp.

His two previous European starters were his Hall of Famer Goodtimes in 1999 and Northern Bailey in 2003. Both are sons of Balanced Image while Define The World is a grandson of that late Ontario sire, also a member of Canada's Horse Racing Hall of Fame. Define The World's sire is

the \$925,000 winning Balanced Image son Duke Of York, a Breeders Crown winner for Bax and owner Al Libfeld who is also the breeder and owner of Define The World.

There are many reasons Bax has found the adventure to be unforgettable and inspiring. First is the most obvious, the chance to represent your country in another land.

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Photo by New Image Media

Define The World's owner/breeder Al Libfeld (second from left), trainer John Bax (fourth from left) and a muddy Paul MacDonell pose with Define The World and friends after his victory in the \$300,000 Ontario Sires Stakes Super final at Woodbine.

"You can't help but feel patriotic and proud," he noted. "When you're standing there and they play the anthem, you tingle. I have to admit, my hair, or at least what hair I have left, stood on end. I was reminded of it when I was watching this year's Olympics when the Canadian flags were raised."

Another appealing factor is the opportunity to view and be part of the incredible pomp and ceremony and tremendous media crush surrounding the Elitlopp.

"I can't describe what it's like to look in the stands and see 35,000 people there. The people are incredible, they are really appreciative of the fact that you've brought your horse from Canada for them to watch.

"I remember with Goodtimes, I was jogging him and a little girl asked if I would stop so she could take a picture. He was a star. I thought at the time 'that doesn't happen at home.'

"It's difficult to try to convey to people what it's like until you've actually

experienced it. It's not about the money, although that would certainly be a plus if you were lucky enough to get a nice piece of the purse. What I try to stress to people is that it's the experience that makes it so worthwhile.

"In Oslo (Norway where the Grand Prix is contested at Bjerke Racetrack) they had the trainers and drivers in a convertible and they drove us around the track and everyone was clapping and waving and cheering, they present you with flowers. They do it right and it's pretty hard not to get emotional about it all."

Of course there is also the cultural experience of being able to see historic sites in countries you've only read about before. The first time Bax and his wife Vicky made the trip, their host in Norway, Arnie Heltberg, the director of racing at Bjerke Racetrack, and his wife took them

to Lillehammer, the site of the 1994 Winter Olympics.

"That first experience was so good and so positive. Arnie was great. I have the impression that Norway and Sweden are like Canada and the US. Sweden and the US think they are a little better so Norway and Canada have to work a bit harder. There's a competitiveness and it was interesting to see the parallels. Like us, the Norwegians seem to try a bit harder.

"Arnie couldn't do enough for us and it was pretty special. We became friends. I realize it's to his benefit to have us coming back and raving about it so perhaps others would want to do the same trip. And I tell anyone who has the chance to go for it."

Goodtimes' performance during the European jaunt made it all the better. He first competed in the Forus Open in Nor-

Another Accomplishment For Define The World,
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Define The World

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Representing your country on the international stage is an accomplishment like no other. Define The World earned the right to represent Canada in Norway's Oslo Grand Prix and Sweden's Elitlopp. Congratulations to owner Al Libfeld, trainer John Bax and driver Paul MacDonell.

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“It sure changed my attitude as far as training horses is concerned and really opened my eyes about training differently. I’m far more receptive to trying something new and am more flexible. We’re all guilty of falling into the same routine because that’s the way we’ve always done it.”

trainer John Bax

way, finishing fifth. Then it was onto Helsinki, Finland for the Finlandia Cup where he finished third. It was back to Norway for the Oslo Grand Prix where he again finished fifth.

In the Elitlopp Goodtimes, who was eight years old when he made the trip, was reunited with his regular driver from home Dave Wall. In the elimination they finished second and then returned to grab third in the final.

The second trip with Northern Bailey wasn’t as successful on the racetrack. Wall again made the trip over to pilot the five-year-old horse and they were sixth in the Grand Prix but the horse made a break in his Elitlopp elimination and did not qualify for the final.

The trip was still memorable for Bax who took a few extra days to visit with family in Holland. “There are lots of relatives there. It was exhausting trying to squeeze it all in and see everyone we could, but it was great.”

What was more profound about both experiences for Bax, who was named Canada’s Trainer of the Year in 2001, was the fact that it changed his outlook on his profession.

“It sure changed my attitude as far as training horses is concerned and really opened my eyes about training differently,” he said simply. “I’m far more receptive to trying something new and am more flexible.

“We’re all guilty of falling into the same routine because

that’s the way we’ve always done it. I have a more open mind now and will try something different. There are 100 different ways to do something, it’s all about trials and tribulations. We get into a rut, doing the same thing week after week, and that’s changed for me.

“In Europe they have a far greater appreciation for the horse, more respect. They also have the luxury of being able to shut a horse down early because there is a lot of money to be made later in their careers. We don’t have that here.

“I’ve always been one to race them at two and three and then sell them, and that’s still the way it is to a degree. But it really opened my eyes to see how they consider a four-year-old young. They take their time with their horses and it pays off for them.

“They also have the economic incentive to quit with a horse a lot quicker than we do and it’s easier to do when there’s lots of money to race for once you bring them back. But they do seem to be more cognizant of the overall health of the horse.

“They are also more inventive. I would say of all the innovations in harness and bikes that have been introduced over the past 20 years, three-quarters of them came from Europe. When there was the exodus of horsemen from Sweden to North America several years ago, many trainers here scoffed at their methods. But they started taking them seriously and paying more attention to what they were doing when they started beating them.

“They aren’t content with the status quo. They try and find solutions whereas here there seems to be a mentality to find a solution in a bottle.

“I think the Europeans are a lot like the horsemen in Canada. They’ve had to deal with the castoffs from the US like we have. Take Balanced Image and Garland Lobell. Those studs weren’t good enough to stand in the US, so we got them. In Europe they have a lot of the castoffs from the US as well. You have to be more resourceful and inventive to try and get those horses gaited and racing as they might not be as natural and that makes them better horsemen,” he explained.

Bax has made some changes to his operation and his training practices as a result of what he observed in Europe.

“I’ve built a path to get the horses off the track more and I don’t train them as hard. I always had paddocks, but I’ve added more so they have more time outside.”



Photo by New Image Media

Define The World is one horse who loves spending time in those paddocks. "He's outside 24/7," said his trainer who first started thinking the horse could be a European trip candidate last fall.

"When he trotted that mile in 52 flat in November last year was when I started dreaming about it as he looked like he could be a player and take on the big boys," said Bax. "I talked to Al about it, he was a bit skeptical at first understandably.

"Since I went the first time it's always been in the back of my mind that I'd like to go again. Arnie contacted me around that time, just feeling me out to see if we'd be interested. I responded that we were but only if we thought the horse was good enough to compete.

"I always stressed that if; he had to be good enough. Arnie knows me well enough by now that he trusts my judgment. If I say I think the horse will be competitive that's good enough for him."

While Bax is quick to admit that his trip with Goodtimes has paved the way for this trip, he also notes this time, 11 years

Northern Bailey, shown here winning at Mohawk for John Campbell in 2004, was John Bax's second European starter. A winner of \$963,285 in his career, the horse now stands at stud in the Maritimes for Meridian Farms.

later, it's much easier especially in terms of communications with email, cell phones, Internet, etc.

"It's 100 times better. Arnie called me this morning in fact on my cell phone; it's just so much simpler. That other thing that makes it that much easier is the fact that I've been there before. When someone talks about a racetrack, a race, an area, I know it, I've been there. There's a great comfort level in that degree of familiarity."

The Internet is also helpful for Define The World's driver Paul MacDonell who is planning on being in Europe for both the Grand Prix and the Elitlopp.

He can simply watch past years' races now on Youtube. "That's so different say from when Wally went over with Goodtimes. Now they can actually see the races and get a gauge of how they race over there so it's not as foreign.

"It is different than here that's for sure," Bax commented. "I've never seen a horse make a three wide move in front of the grandstand to be first over before I went there."

What will also help MacDonell to a certain degree is the fact that there will be two other North American drivers in the Elitlopp, Andy Miller aboard Lucky Jim and Luc Ouellette on Enough Talk. Although the race goes in two eight horse eliminations so there is the possibility they would draw away from each other.

The plans call for Define The World to depart on May 8 and fly to Amsterdam. He'll likely lay over for 12 hours or so in a horse hotel that's there and then make the 10 to 12 hour trip to Norway. Bax expects he'll likely have to give him a tranquilizer to keep him calm during his travels.

"He likes to kick when he ships," he

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Photo by New Image Media

said. "There is supposed to be another horse going with him which is good, he likes to travel with another horse. That's the unknown, how he'll handle the trip and how long it will take him to adjust once we get there.

"It took Goodtimes a long time to become acclimatized. I've heard some people say it takes 10 days, others find it longer. Define The World is a fairly aggressive horse, he's outside all the time, he'll have a few things to get used to there.

"Goodtimes was fairly wound up the entire time and I remember Woody (the late William Wellwood) saying the same thing about Armbro Marshall when he took him over, he could just not get him to settle down.

"There are a lot of things that are so different for them. At the Elitlopp there are 35,000 people in the grandstand and the crowd is fairly close to the track. Our horses aren't used to that and you have no idea how they'll respond and react until you're there."

Define The World's first race in Norway, the Grand Prix, is on May 16. He'll have two weeks after that until the Elitlopp on May 30 which is contested in two heats which Bax doesn't believe will faze him.

John Bax's first trip to Europe was with Goodtimes, an inductee into the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame in 2004. A winner of \$2.2 million in his career, the Balanced Image gelding retired as the richest Canadian bred trotter in history.

"I'm not training him any differently for it, I didn't with Goodtimes either and he was fine. I think that's the Balanced Image coming out in them, they're tough."

Bax plans to have the horse shod just before he leaves. "I'm very conscious of his front feet. Like 90 per cent of all horses that are racing his can get a little tender."

Bax himself won't be traveling with the horse, his assistant trainer Steve Sills will be making the trip with him. John and Vicky will fly over the week before the Elitlopp as their eldest son, Marshall, 23, is graduating from Acadia University on May 16.

The days leading up to his departure are filled with ensuring all the arrangements are in order and fielding many media requests. Define The World's European trip has been featured on Bax's local television station and in the *Peterborough Examiner* newspaper. He's also receiving regular calls from European writers.

The horse will be sent with his regular

feed, equipment and race bike. He leaves on his adventure off a second place performance in the \$42,000 Open Trot at Woodbine on May 3 where he finished a length behind winner San Pail timed in 1:53.1. His resume reads two wins and four second place finishes from eight starts this year for \$92,000 earned. Lifetime he has 23 wins in \$1.1 million in purses.

While Bax is anticipating the trip and a chance to relive his past experiences, he's also thankful that Define The World's owner and breeder Al Libfeld will have the opportunity.

"To me it's great for Al. He's been in the game a long time and this is the first chance he's had to get over there. Regardless of the outcome it's the ultimate experience and I'm really hoping it will be good for him.

"We can't predict how the horse will do, there are so many variables. He's competitive and loves to win. I'm truly hoping he shows well for Canada and for Al." 🐾