







# THE CALL OF HOME

The combination of weather and the lure of home led Darren McCall to return to Queensland where he is now re-establishing himself as one of the better horsemen in the racing game.

By Harold Howe

Canada gets a bum rap when it comes to the subject of weather but don't try and tell Darren McCall that.

After nine years in the frozen north he'd had enough, packed his bags and returned to the warm rays of Queensland. And despite the tragic flooding the area experienced recently, he could not be happier.

"Man, I wasn't made for cold weather. The money to race for on the Woodbine/Mohawk circuit and in the Ontario Sires Stakes program was terrific but I just couldn't see myself doing it any longer.

"Five years ago my wife and I devised a plan to move back to Australia and we just about hit the mark," says the 40 year-old Sydney native.



Photo by New Image Media

McCall leaves Canada with an enviable resume having harnessed a \$1 million Metro Pace winner and a pair of Breeders Crown champions. He's recognized as an accomplished horseman so his decision to leave Canada came as a surprise to many who had come to see him as one of theirs.

Now it is down to the business of re-establishing himself in his native land.

"I'm under no illusion about what people are thinking here. There are some who will say that while he did all right in America that doesn't mean he can cut it here. And you know what? That attitude is the same the world over.

"When Per Ericsson went back to Sweden after establishing himself as one of the best trotting men in the world, the people there didn't want to know him," says McCall.

"When Brett Pelling packed it in a few years ago there was no rush to get him training again in Perth other than maybe by his close friend Nevin Botica. It's just the way people are which doesn't bother me.

"I'm prepared for it and don't doubt my ability to train horses. The yearling sales are here and I have a few

Deuce Seelster was one of McCall's most successful Ontario Sires Stakes performers. The son of Western Maverick earned well over \$600,000 as a two-year-old racing strictly in Canada. He is now a regular on the Yonkers circuit where he shows over a million on his card lifetime. To watch his North America Cup elimination victory as a three-year-old, [please click here](#).

customers so we'll work with what we have."

If nothing else McCall is a pragmatist despite the fact that he came to Canada knowing that "I don't like the cold, don't ski, can't skate but ended up here. I guess I have to blame Ross Croghan."

Croghan, another transplanted Australian who had made his mark in the United States, returned to Australia in January of 1998 for a holiday. His father and Darren's father were great mates so it was inevitable that Croghan and Darren crossed paths on that trip.

"It was race day and the farrier had not turned up. There was this one horse that had four shoes falling off so I reshod him. Ross just stood back and watched. All kinds of stuff had to get done because it was a busy day," he recalls.

"Later on he came over and said any time I wanted a job just to give him a call. He was based in New Jersey and I was going to ask him anyway about coming over but didn't tell him that. I was working for Stuart Hunter at the time and just told him I'd get back to him.





Photo by New Image Media

"For three consecutive days I told Stuart I was going to go work for Ross and for three straight days he talked me out of it. Finally, I told him he wasn't talking me out of it because I'd already called Ross and told him I was coming."

McCall saw America as a place to learn and the Meadowlands in New Jersey the big show. He was 29, had never been anywhere and it was now or never.

When he arrived at Croghan's 60 horse barn it was more than he imagined it would be.

"There were so many horses and so many people working on horses. At home I was accustomed to seeing three people on 30 horses and then I came here I see 10 people for the same number. I was astounded."

He found himself in good company with Kiwis Mark Harder and Tony O'Sullivan as assistant trainers and as McCall says "after the first week I thought this was the easiest job I'd ever had.

"It was so easy compared to being back home. All I had to do was drive horses, wash a few jog carts and go

McCall is equally adept at training trotters and pacers as evidenced by the \$2 million winner Corleone Kosmos the winner of the 2008 Breeders Crown and multiple other stakes. His Breeders Crown victory over a field of very talented performers may be watched by [clicking here](#).

home. I was going around helping people because I was bored."

But then the racing season kicked off in full tilt and the action was non-stop. Croghan was racing horses at the Meadowlands, Yonkers and Freehold Raceways and Pocono Downs. At the Meadowlands alone Croghan's barn made 800 starts which was a record at the time.

This was what McCall was bred to do. His father, grandfather, uncle and "a bunch of cousins" all raced horses. He pointed out that his family was capable of creating a race of 15 starters with all

the drivers being family members.

"When I was in high school it was pretty much a case of waiting until I could get out of there. I had no intention of doing anything other than the horses although I did start a carpentry apprenticeship when I left school at 16."

Like most young males, Darren found driving the most appealing and with the allowances for junior drivers it was even more enticing.

"I just thought I was really good but it was a matter of being able to drive horses that were better than the rest of the fields. After I stopped winning races



Photo by New Image Media

it hit me that I wasn't really that good a driver so I started to focus a little more on training for my Dad. And after that I went to work for Stuart Hunter on and off for two or three years.

"My father taught me a lot. I remember when I was 14 being told that I had to learn how to shoe a horse when I wanted to play cricket. He said he wasn't going to be able to hold my hand all the time.

"So here I was 14 years old shoeing yearlings but it taught me a lot of good skills. Now if something goes wrong I don't need to call someone to come and fix it."

McCall to this day holds great admiration for Stuart Hunter.

"Stuart trained horses differently than many Australians and I came to learn more like Ross did in North America. I was really interested in how he did things and at the time it helped with turning around some of my own horses. He's just a good, good horseman."

But how did the move to Canada come about?

If there is a person to blame it would be Eric Cherry, a well-heeled

Another of McCall's stable stars was the Bettors Delight daughter Southwind Tempo who was retired late last year with over \$2.4 million earned. She is shown above winning the 2009 Milton Stake at Mohawk, where she was parked all the way and last at the head of the stretch. That race may be watched by [clicking here](#).

Florida owner in Croghan's barn. A true student of the game, Cherry wanted to race some horses at Woodbine and Mohawk Racetracks and approached McCall to see if he would be prepared to move there.

The opportunity seemed a good one because McCall and his wife Karina wanted to eventually open their own stable anyway.

McCall headed for a small farm near Mohawk Racetrack (30 minutes driving time west of Toronto) with six horses. Among them was the older pacing mare Carolina Sunshine (Cambest) who set a 1:48.4 world record and the two-year-old

Malabar Man filly named Pick Me Up. A few weeks later she would win the \$768,000 Breeders Crown, an auspicious start to say the least.

But then winter came and McCall was anything but impressed.

"It was so cold that year I told my wife I'd had enough. I wanted to go back to Australia but she said I was a quitter. I've never quit anything in my life and that was the only reason I stayed. I might be a lot of things but I'm not a quitter," he declares.

About five years ago his persuasive arguments began to wear down Karina and finally she agreed to a five year plan



with the goal to eventually relocate to Australia even though her home was Denmark.

"We wanted to get there before we got too old and could no longer enjoy what we do for a living. This past November was the end of the fifth year and I just could not bear the thought of going through another winter so we pulled the plug and left on January 25. Here we are."

But when the flooding disaster hit Queensland including Albion Park, Darren admits he was having some second thoughts.

"Albion Park has been hit before but that was getting pretty close to where we were going to base and I have to admit I began to wonder. But it didn't and everything is dry where we are. I feel for all those poor people who got wiped out though."

McCall is also looking to the potential prosperity in Sydney with the sale of Harold Park.

"It looks like the prize money will

be huge but let's not kid ourselves it will not be easy to get. The money attracts the best horses and horsemen so the competition will be the toughest in all of the southern hemisphere," he points out.

"We're basing in Queensland to start with but if things go like I hope then Sydney is definitely in the plans. But it's all about getting the horsepower."

Aussies and Kiwis seem to carry this belief that North Americans are superior horsemen, however McCall believes they can more than hold their own with their counterparts.

"When I went over the first thing I noticed above all else was that Ross was smart enough to train horses for distance to make them stronger. He had worked it out long ago that the North American horses were already bred for speed.

"The trainer's job was to make them strong enough to carry the speed further. There was no need to train them

fast because they already were fast," he explains.

"I worked out what Ross was doing was taking the down under stuff and getting the horse to be strong so that when that last eighth of a mile came when the horses needed it the most, they had it."

And that may have played a role in McCall having been remarkably consistent with his stable in his time in Canada. In the nine years no less than seven of them produced \$1 million in earnings or more. The 2010 campaign just missed with \$948,000.

His resume is solid with horses like Breeders Crown winning trotter Corleone Kosmos, millionaire pacing mares Southwind Tempo and Tug River Princess and the former Ontario star Deuce Seelster.

"This is another chapter in my life. I just refuse to get old in freezing temperatures. Growing up where you are warm for 10 months of the year versus being cold six months of the year makes it pretty simple." 🐾



## OPENING NEW PUBLIC STABLE

After nine years in North America, I am returning to my home in Australia to open a public stable. To begin with I will be based near Albion Park with a probable move to Sydney later in the year.

In my time in Canada and the United States I have trained horses like millionaires and Grand Circuit winners Carolina Sunshine, Southwind Tempo, Corleone Kosmos, Tug River Princess and Deuce Seelster.

"I've known Darren for many years and have tremendous respect for his opinion and horsemanship. I've driven many horses he trained and also had him train horses I owned. I was always very impressed with how he sent his horses to the track and his realistic approach after one races in terms of what the horse was or was not capable of. I would never hesitate for a moment to have him train another for me again."



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...driver John Campbell

Now seeking new clients interested in purchasing yearlings at the upcoming yearling sales as well as racehorses. My tentative arrival in Australia is January 25. Call today for more discussion.

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