

“Hearts in the Race”: The Quiet Trials of Harness Racing and the Horse That Nearly Lost It All

BY ANNA ECKBURG

ANDERSON, IN. - It started like any other morning on Tyler George’s training track in Indiana; the soft thuds of hooves against the dirt, the gentle puff of breath in the chilly spring air, and the subtle tension of a horse just shy of race shape. Tellitlikeiseeit, a chestnut Standardbred gelding, was working toward his return to the track. The goal: qualifying for the 2025 harness racing season after a winter off.

Then something changed.

“No matter how much chirping we did, he kept going slower and slower,” George said. “When he came back to the barn, we knew something wasn’t right.”

It wasn’t just fatigue or a training off-day. It was atrial fibrillation (AFIB) a heart arrhythmia that, while relatively rare in George’s experience, can derail a racehorse’s entire career. What followed was not just a veterinary emergency, but a window into the delicate, often unseen balancing act at the core of harness racing: between performance and well-being, tradition and innovation, and passion.

A Different Kind of Race

Harness racing, often overshadowed by the glamour of thoroughbred racing, has its own culture. The Standardbreds that pull sulkies at 30 miles per hour are bred for speed, stamina, and composure. The sport is gritty, intimate, and often generational, passed down in barns and tack rooms more than boardrooms and TV contracts.

“I’ve trained horses since 2004 and have had almost 6,700 starts,” George said. “I’ve only seen two cases of AFIB, and both were this year. Rollin Rosie came back on her own, but Tellitlikeiseeit needed the heart shocked back into rhythm.”

That shock, called a transvenous electrical cardioversion (TVEC), is a high-stakes, high-tech procedure. It’s not just sticking paddles on a horse’s chest like a scene from ER. The University of Illinois’ veterinary teaching hospital is one of a handful of clinics equipped to perform it.

Ina Mersich, a veterinary student specializing in equine medicine, helped coordinate Tellitlikeiseeit’s treatment.

“The procedure is basically the only way to put them back into sinus rhythm,” she said. “You can’t just use a defibrillator like on a human. Horses are too big. You have to place electrodes inside the heart itself and shock it back from the inside.”

A Rare and Risky Path

The TVEC process is as delicate as it is dramatic. First, the horse is sedated. Then, two electrodes are inserted through catheters in the jugular vein. After radiographic imaging confirms their placement, the horse is fully anesthetized, placed under general anesthesia, and put on a ventilator.

“Then we shock the heart,” Mersich explained. “It starts with low voltage and gradually increases until the heart returns to a normal rhythm.”

It’s not cheap. For Tellitlikeiseeit, the bill ran close to \$3,700. But for his owner, who wished to remain anonymous, it was never a question.

“He didn’t hesitate,” said George. “Even if the horse might not race again, at least he could be used for riding or be a family pet. That’s how much this horse means.”

Not every owner would make that call. Some would have opted to retire the horse quietly or sell him off. But that’s the hard part about harness racing: these animals are family, investments, athletes, and friends all at once.

The Weight of Care

Horses like Tellitlikeiseeit don’t just race on heart; they race on management. AFIB may have been the tip of the iceberg.

“We’ve had some trouble keeping weight on him,” George admitted. “When he came back from the farm this winter, they had switched to a different grain, and he was a little too thin. I was told AFIB can be caused by a shortage of potassium. That feed change might have played a part.”

Despite their reputation as hardy and gentle, Standardbreds are finely tuned machines. Slight variations in diet, stress, or even temperature can change how they perform, or whether they race at all. And increasingly, trainers like George lean on science rather than gut instinct.

“In the past, I might try to limp a horse along on my own,” said George. “Now, I place their care strictly in the hands of professionals. They have the equipment, the experience, and they know how to get the horse back on the track.”

That philosophy is paying off. After just two weeks off, Tellitlikeiseeit was back in training. He's since qualified and is preparing for the 2025 racing season, healthier, stronger, and perhaps even hungrier.

"He's a nice horse to work with," said George. "Once we gelded him, he became more focused. He's a gentleman around the barn. He's got a good work ethic."

Gentle Giants

For Mersich, working with Standardbreds has been an unexpected joy.

"I didn't have much experience with them before coming to U of I," she said. "But we get a lot of them here. They're really lovely to work with. Very gentle, very easy-going. I always liked horses—I've had one since I was 13. But Standardbreds have a special calm about them."

That demeanor often masks the physical toll they endure. Like human athletes, they train year-round, sustain injuries, and require constant care and attention. But unlike human athletes, they can't speak for themselves. That's where trainers, vets, and owners step in.

"A healthy horse usually makes the most money," said George. "We always side with the well-being of the animal. If owners just want to make money, I'm probably not the right trainer for them."

It's a sentiment echoed in barns across the country. While harness racing may lack the spotlight, it burns bright with the kind of passion and stewardship that defines real sport, where the competitor is a creature of muscle and mind, and the stakes include not just trophies, but trust.

Pacing Forward

Tellitlikeiseeit's story is far from over. George is optimistic with his heart back in rhythm and his weight stabilizing.

"He's ready to race," he said. "We're watching him closely, giving him the best shot. That's all you can do."

A horse is more than a hopeful winner; Tellitlikeiseeit is an icon of what the sport still offers: resilience, tradition, and a bond that science helps preserve between humans and animals.

"He might not be the best I've ever owned," said his owner, "but he's definitely one of the most meaningful. We got lucky, and he got a second chance."

In harness racing, as in life, second chances don't always come. But when they do, they ride not on luck, but on the people willing to put their hearts on the line, and in the race.