

Tony and Leslie Russo

Horses bred by Tony and Leslie Russo of Grimsby, Ontario have found homes around the globe, racing in places as far-flung as Kazakhstan, Korea, France, Australia, and the Philippines. Between them, the Russos bring more than 60 years of breeding experience to the table and over the decades they have sold a remarkable number of quality horses.

The latest and perhaps most exciting addition to that list is Pageant Queen, a filly who may prove to be one of the best horses ever raised on the Russos' 15-acre Bella Maria Farm. A daughter of leading Ontario sire Point of Entry out of the Russos' treasured mare Queen of the Dawn, Pageant Queen placed in four stakes races as a two-year-old in 2025 for owners Windways Farm and Upland Flats Racing. She now sits firmly on the short list of contenders for the prestigious Woodbine Oaks.

"We've been lucky," said Leslie Russo, who, like Tony, has always been hands-on with the horses they breed and raise. "We're hoping Pageant Queen can win the Oaks this year."

The Russos met about 35 years ago in a setting familiar to many horse people. Leslie was sitting on a dumpster on the Fort Erie backstretch, having come down from Woodbine to pick up a horse that a friend was claiming.

"This fellow walks over and asks me the time," Leslie recalled with a laugh. "I said, 'You're wearing a watch,' and I walked away."

Tony Russo, however, was persistent and eventually earned that first date.

By the time they met, both Tony and Leslie already had deep roots in the Thoroughbred industry. Leslie, who studied nuclear medical technology, began riding at age 11 and later worked at Bo-Teek Farms in Vineland, where she broke a colt named Lord Avie for George Frostad. Sold as a two-year-old, Lord Avie went on to become that year's Eclipse Award-winning juvenile male.

Tony's path began even earlier. He immigrated from Italy to the Grimsby area at age nine. "My brother gave me five dollars to take to Fort Erie," Tony said. "I won \$4.10 and I started going to the track all the time."

Tony bought his first horse in 1961, began breeding within a few years, and joined CTHS Ontario in 1966. He eventually purchased a small farm, naming it Bella Maria after his mother. Breeding primarily to sell, Tony moved hundreds of yearlings through the sales, stood a stallion Evzone, in partnership with George Yemec and even helped support the early stud career of Frank DiGuilio's standout runner Domasca Dan.

“I once saw statistics from when Fasig-Tipton ran the Ontario sale showing Bella Maria had sold 29 horses through them for \$3.9 million,” Tony recalled.

Several years after Tony and Leslie married in 2001, the couple made what would become one of the most important purchases of their breeding career.

“I have a thing about older mares,” said Leslie. “At the mixed sale in 2005, Hill ’n’ Dale had a mare named Midnight Stroll, by Private Account. My nephew was there, and I told him to buy her for me. I paid \$1,000.”

Midnight Stroll was not in foal, but Leslie bred her to the \$2-million earner Sun King, producing Queen of the Dawn. Though Dawna never raced, “she was goofy,” Leslie said, she has become a cornerstone broodmare for the Russos.

Queen of the Dawn produced Listenlindalisten, by Court Vision, sold to Conrad Farms in 2015. She went on to win two stakes and is now producing winners in Australia. Dawna’s second foal, Timeskip, also by Court Vision, earned more than \$328,000 (US) and was graded stakes-placed for Wallace Standardbreds and Renee Kierans.

In 2018, the Russos realized a longtime dream when they entered into a foal-sharing arrangement with Taylor Made Farm for a breeding to California Chrome. The resulting colt, Saratoga Chrome, sold for \$117,000 (US) at the 2019 Fasig-Tipton sale.

Pageant Queen, Dawna’s seventh foal to race, was a \$35,000 yearling who showed immediate ability. Trained by Jamie Begg, she won her career debut and later finished second in the Muskoka and South Ocean Stakes and third in the My Dear and Victorian Queen Stakes, earning more than \$117,000.

Queen of the Dawn is currently in foal to leading U.S. sire Maclean’s Music, with the resulting foal due in 2026. The Russos also have Dawna’s 2020 daughter Danzigqueen booked to the same stallion.

Their newest broodmare, Avie’s Zip, by City Zip, was purchased for \$2,000 at the recent CTHS National Digital Mixed Sale while in foal to Ami’s Flatter.

Looking ahead, the Russos are excited to offer a filly by Souper Speedy—from his final crop—out of Danzigqueen at the 2026 local sale.

Beyond the sales ring, the Russos take pride in tracking every horse they’ve bred and ensuring their retired broodmares are well cared for.

“We put the retired mares out in the ‘freeloaders’ field,” Tony joked. “But they live out their days there.”

Though both Tony and Leslie have faced health challenges in recent years, their passion for breeding continues to energize them.

“We raise a pretty good horse, I think,” Tony said simply. “We love it.”