

Robert Marzilli: From Backyard Dream to Breeder's Spotlight

Robert Marzilli's introduction to horse racing didn't start at the track—but in the backyard. About a dozen years ago, one of his three daughters begged for a horse as a pet. That innocent request sparked a journey that would take the Marzilli family to the top of Canadian racing.

During a family holiday gathering, Marzilli's sister-in-law's father, Charlie Spiteri—a lifelong racing fan—suggested a different approach: “Why not buy a racehorse instead?”

It wasn't long before Marzilli took the plunge. With Spiteri's help, he was introduced to trainer Mike DePaulo, and in 2013 the pair attended the CTHS Ontario yearling sale. There, they purchased a grey filly by *Philanthropist* from Paul Buttigieg for just over \$20,000.

Named Racen—a blend of letters from the names of Robert, his wife Anna, and their daughters Carmfaye, Elizabeth, and Natalia—the filly became a beloved member of the family. Frequent visits to the barn and race days became part of the family routine. By the time Racen won her second race in the fall of 2014, Marzilli was ready for a second horse.

DePaulo spotted another filly at the October Fasig-Tipton Kentucky sale: an Ontario-bred daughter of *Society's Chairman*, bred by James and Janeane Everatt and Arika Everatt-Meeuse. Marzilli paid \$45,000 (USD) and named her Caren, created using the same naming formula as Racen.

That purchase turned out to be a stroke of brilliance.

Caren burst onto the scene in 2015, winning her first three starts as a two-year-old at Woodbine—including the Shady Well and Nandi Stakes—and finishing third in the Grade 1 Natalma. She capped off her juvenile campaign with victories in the Princess Elizabeth and Victorian Queen Stakes.

But 2016 was the year that cemented her place in Canadian racing history. Caren captured two-thirds of the Triple Tiara series for Canadian-bred three-year-old fillies—the Bison City and Wonder Where Stakes—after finishing third in the Woodbine Oaks. She added two more stakes victories to her résumé and was ultimately named Canada's Horse of the Year and Champion Three-Year-Old Filly.

“I remember standing in the infield winner's circle with Mike after one of Caren's stakes wins,” Marzilli recalled. “He said, ‘Get a good look at the grandstand from here, because it's not usually this easy.’”

Caren retired with over \$821,000 in earnings—and left Marzilli hooked.

Naturally, the next step was breeding.

Today, Zilli Racing Stable is a thriving operation with around 85 horses, including 20 broodmares. Marzilli, the president, CEO, and owner of RAM Contracting, remains just as

passionate as when he started. “When I first got involved, I had no clue about racing or breeding,” he said. “But I’ve learned a lot from people like Arika, Mike, and Paul Sharp in Ocala.”

Caren has become the foundation mare for the program, producing several foals including Curlin Candy, a stakes-placed runner. Marzilli hasn’t sold any of Caren’s offspring yet, but her *Nyquist* colt will be offered in Book 2 at the Keeneland September sale this fall.

Zilli Racing’s first top-tier homebred was Tito’s Calling, a daughter of Society’s Chairman out of Unstablenthemornin (First Dude). A buyback at the 2021 CTHS yearling sale for \$27,000, she went on to earn over \$500,000, including a win in the Wonder Where Stakes. She has since joined the broodmare band.

Though Marzilli often buys back his sales prospects, he has seen success at auction. In 2023, he sold a Practical Joke colt out of Cry Uncle—a mare he claimed for \$10,000—for \$150,000. The buyers resold the colt for an eye-popping \$475,000 as a two-year-old in training.

With an exciting crop of 2-year-olds heading to the races and yearlings set to sell at the CTHS Ontario sale in August, Marzilli is eager for what’s next.

“I love the game and it’s exciting,” he said. “Now I’m hoping to get lucky on the breeding side by selling a good one.”