



Brandon Brant took his first trip to the NRHA Futurity finals aboard Smart Dundee (Conquistador Whiz x Smart Oaklynn x Smart Chic Olena).—Photo by Waltenberry

Equi-Stat Inside Track

Taking On the Challenge

Failure is not an option.

By Kelsey Pecsek



Brant attributes much of his success to his wife, Cathy's, support.—Photo by Erin Haynes

Brandon Brant is a gentleman. His manners are impeccable, but the undertone of energy in his voice reveals who he truly is underneath his polite nature. Brant is driven. He is dedicated. He will not accept failure.

The 29-year-old London, Ohio-based trainer is not shy about his attraction to challenge. In fact, proving naysayers wrong just inspires him to persevere.

"I'm the type of guy that, if somebody says it can't be done, I want to do it," Brant said. "If something's not a challenge, it's never interested me."

Over the last seven years, Brant has taken all the challenges of being a new reining trainer head-on. Despite the difficulties, Brant is far from unsuccessful. He has amassed a \$164,130 **Equi-Stat** record, with \$162,997 earned in the last 5 1/2 years.

Hockey to horses

Brant was born deep in Weatherford, Texas, horse country, however, he was raised in Somerset, Pa., and spent most of his time on the ice.

While Brant's father was not a horseman by trade, his family had horses for fun and entertainment.

"It's just something that we did to get away," he explained. "I actually played semi-pro hockey growing up."

As a late teen, deciding on a college can seem like a daunting task. For Brant, the University of Findlay was an obvious choice, as it was complete with a competitive hockey team and respected equestrian program.

"I got burned out [on hockey]," Brant said. "I got my degree in business and equestrian studies. The first two years you start colts and ride pretty much anything. The last two years, you get to pick cutting or reining."

"That's when I rode my first reiner," he explained. "Clark Bradley, the instructor at Findlay, was big into reining and that's where I got my start."

Brant didn't gain much show experience in school, but instead,

focused his energy on his studies. In a program similar to a pre-vet curriculum, he said he learned about nutrition, breeding, anatomy and training.

"It's helped me a ton [in my career]," Brant said. "I think knowing conformation is the most important thing when you go to pick a horse. The biggest thing is knowing how that horse is put together – if it's going to stop and what's going to make everything easier."

Not just reining horses

Being equipped with textbook knowledge is an asset for trainers, but knowing one's sport is essential. Brant turned to some of the best in the business to round out his reining education.

He began his hands-on journey in Columbus, Ohio, with Gabe Hutchins.

"Gabe really helped me with the maneuvers, the turning and teaching one to run and stop," Brant explained.

In June of 2005, Brant stepped in to the NRHA show pen for the first time. He was mounted on Hollywoods Poco Salt (Hollywood Eighty Six x A Pocos Bay Star x San Up Star), owned by Devon Hutchins, Crestline, Ohio, and bred by Scott Hill, Eggleston, Va. Brant, who never showed as a non-pro, was officially on the map with an **Equi-Stat** Open record of \$527 by the end of the year.

With a handle on the technical side of the patterns, Brant jumped at an opportunity to work on technique. **Equi-Stat Elite** \$1 Million Reining Rider Jordan Larson, Whitesboro, Texas, offered Brant a position, where he doubled his earnings in a year.

"I consider Jordan one of the premier showmen in our industry," Brant said. "He helped me to prepare my horses a little bit more, to get in their minds and trust them, and to trust myself."

"The main reason in going to work for him was to learn how to show a horse," he continued. "That's where I wanted to center my program – I wanted to train show horses, not just reining horses."



"I play one day a week. It's to get exercise and keep me in shape," Brant said. —Photo courtesy of Cathy Brant

Call for home

Two years under two different trainers was not a lot of time for Brant to master his trade, but when the chance to move back to Ohio arose, he couldn't turn it down. Although he spent five years in Texas as a child, home would always be north.

"[Whitesboro] was good, but I like to do my own thing," Brant explained about his loyalty to Ohio. "I went to school here and I just love it. We're close to family here and it's a centrally located area for us."

Brant knew he was taking a major risk when he decided to leave Larson Performance Horses, but he said it certainly wasn't out of character.

"I'd been hearing 'You're not ready,' and I thought, 'It sounds like a great opportunity and I want to live in Ohio,' so I took it. I grew up that way. My dad always raised me that if you want to be the best at something, you've got to set your goals high."

Unfortunately, Brant's first leap into training on his own ended with a stumble.

"It didn't pan out, but it sounded good at the time," Brant said, with no remorse in his voice. "I didn't know it was as tough as it was when I first started it, but that's what I wanted to do."

Since he had just begun his solo career, 2007 was not a standout year for Brant in the show pen. He attributes his lull to a small client base, but has no regrets about the path he took.

"I would've done it all the same," he said. "We all want to be million dollar riders, but getting that customer base is one of the big things for me."

Breakout

As the door closed on the opportunity that brought Brant back to Ohio, a window opened so that he could continue to grow. Bob Rosenfeld of Columbus-based Roseland Farms named Brant head trainer.

During his first full year at the new facility, Brant banked \$4,952. Moving into 2009, he gained more confidence as a showman and he garnered another \$15,948. That was also the year Brant made up his mind to ignore the mumbles and grumbles of the people who were uncomfortable with his fast-track mentality.

"I want to be a horseman," Brant said, confidently. "I want to take every horse to its maximum potential. They're not all [NRHA] Futurity or Derby champions, but they each serve a purpose to each individual that owns them. The goal at hand is to make it the best you can."

With his head high, Brant took 2010 by storm. He started the year strong with No. 1 and No. 2 finishes at several events, including the Florida Reining Classic and the Gordyville Breeders Cup. From there, he soared.

Riding Dun It With A Splash (Reminic N Dunit x BB Holly Doll x Star Chex Badger), then-owned by Joe Wolfe, Catlettsburg, Ky., and bred by Susan Goldman, New York, N.Y., at the 2010 NRHA Derby, Brant made his first big splash in the industry.

"I bought [the horse] as a 2-year-old," Brant said. "I sold him at the right time and I ended up getting him back [to train and show]. He was the start of my success. I owe a lot to that horse."

The duo picked up Champion titles in Levels 1 and 2, along with

a Reserve Championship in the Level 3. Their performance was worth \$17,665.

After his triumph at the Derby, Brant married his long-time girlfriend, Cathy.

"My wife has been incredible through this," he said. "I couldn't do it without her. The responsibility outside of the barn is huge and she takes care of all of that. Besides that, she keeps me mentally on the straight and narrow. It's good to have somebody patting you on the shoulder and tapping you on the butt at the same time."

True to form, Brant only gained momentum, refusing to slow down. His dreams were wrapped up in the NRHA Futurity, and he was determined to make a good showing.

Brant piloted Smart Dundee (Conquistador Whiz x Smart Oaklynn x Smart Chic Olena), then-owned by his new wife and bred by M. McKibben and H. Zimmerman, Whitesboro, Texas, to the Open finals for the first time in his career.

"I was a 215.5 in the first go and then in the second go, I came back and marked a 224.5," he recalled. "That was a rush. That was my biggest goal – I wanted to make the Futurity finals. That's what I get up for every morning."

Brant and Smart Dundee were Reserve Champions in the Level 1, third in the Level 2, fourth in the Level 3 and tied for 14th in the Level 4. Altogether, he took home a check for nearly \$40,000.

"It's flattering to me," Brant said. "That was huge. I think it's the toughest thing in our industry to do. That's like making the Super Bowl. I couldn't be more proud."

Passing on the knowledge

Brant admits, after riding a couple of superstars in 2010, things have been slower for him. He is in no way discouraged; he just knows that amazing horses like Smart Dundee and Dun It With A Splash don't come around every year.

"I'm young yet," he explained. "I think my location probably hurts me a little bit. Texas and Oklahoma are kind of hot spots,

Tip From the Top

Getting to the top can be a struggle for new trainers. One might get discouraged because there are so many great trainers to compete with. According to Brandon Brant, fighting that feeling is key.

"You've got to believe in yourself," he said. "Know your strengths and know your weaknesses. If there's something you need help with, get help. There's always somebody better than you, but I think confidence is so important."

"It was 2009 when I said, 'I'm not going to care what anybody thinks or says,' and 2010 was the greatest year of my life. There's going to be eyes on you and you're going to be in tough situations. You've just got to believe in yourself and you've got to work hard."

"Never be too proud to get help," he concluded. "We're all learning. I think if you can accept that, you'll find success a lot faster." —**KP**

and Shawn [Florida] is 20 minutes down the road. So, I've taken some non-pros in.

"I love it," he continued. "Teaching is good. When you teach somebody else, you reaffirm things in your own mind. It makes me go back and practice what I preach."

In 2011, Brant stuck close to home and secured titles at local events in Ohio. Cathy was even named Rookie of the Year at their local association.

"A huge burden was lifted off me when I made the Open Futurity finals," Brant said. "Every horse that somebody sends to me, we do the best we can to make it better. All you can do is just work hard on what you have, and hopefully, somebody will notice it." ★