

# One Bright Light

Comeback king Chatham Light enters second decade of competition

by Ardith Carlton

**O**N ONE SIDE OF THE CAR window, the eyes of week-old Destiny Croucher were wide with wonder.

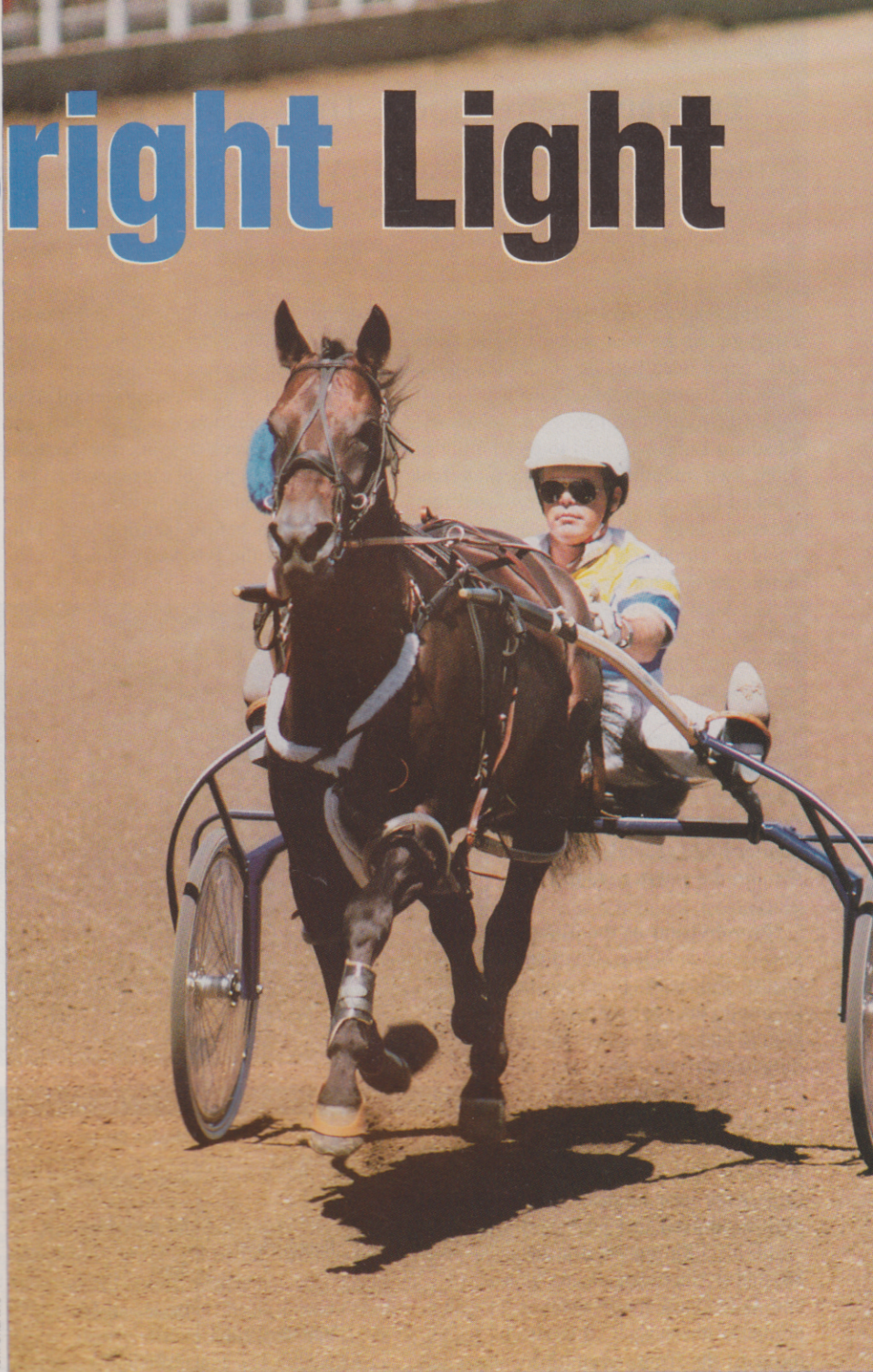
Daddy Mike Croucher, 29, was walking his stable's star, aged pacer Chatham Light, up to the vehicle for his firstborn's first look at a horse—and the response on both sides of the glass was immediate.

"Chatham put his nose right up against the window," said Croucher. "My daughter's eyes bugged out, and she was just giggling away!"

Exactly a decade ago, as a precocious freshman whose unprecedented early talent made him a star before he'd ever raced, Chatham Light had a lot of people reacting that same way.

Chatham Light was the second foal of Miles End Brenda, a Most Happy Fella mare who had finished a distant third to Niatross in his then-world-record 1:52.4 race mile at Syracuse. Their rematch came in the breeding shed, and after she delivered Miles End Jerry p,3,2:00.3f (\$8,267) for breeder-owner James Mendelson, Miles End Brenda was sold, carrying what would be her second Niatross colt, to Joe Caico.

Named by Caico for a lighthouse in Maine, Chatham Light was consigned by Caico's Stoney Hill Farms to the 1986 Kentucky Standardbred Select Yearling Sale. It was there that Bob Waxman asked trainer Soren Nordin to examine the long-barrelled bay colt wearing hip number 9.



Tom Chatham

Nordin, a stickler for conformation, was quite impressed with the youngster and asked if he was a Speedy Crown colt. Waxman shook his head. Nordin's guesses of other top trotting stallions were also incorrect, and he finally asked the sire's name. Waxman broke it to him with a grin.

A bid of \$135,000 later, Chatham Light belonged to Waxman, and became the single pacer among the 36 yearlings in Team Nordin's Pompano barn.

Prior to their second-place finish in the 1987 Review-Little Pat at Springfield, Jan Nordin warms up Chatham Light, one of a select few pacing pupils ever trained by Team Nordin. "They [Jan and father Soren] classified him as better than [1984 2-Year-Old Pacing Filly of the Year] Amneris at the time," recalled Jan Nordin's wife, Silvi.

**“Everybody** remembers. They might not remember the names of the races or how fast, but they remember how much of a horse he was.”

—MIKE CROUCHER

“He was so very well behaved and clean-gaited; he was an ‘A’ student from day one,” recalled Jan Nordin’s wife, Silvi, and soon, fantastic tales were coming from winter quarters. In mid-January, Chatham Light was said to be training in 2:05; two months later, horsemen had clocked him in 1:58. It was rumored that Waxman sold 20 percent of Chatham Light to Almahurst Farm for \$2 million before the colt had even raced.

On May 26, 1987, the colt and Jan Nordin solidified the pre-season stories with a six-length score in a Meadowlands baby race in 1:57.1, the fastest a freshman had ever officially paced so early in the year. They took a second baby race by 13 lengths in 1:58.2, last quarter in 28 seconds flat, and then hit the stakes road toward glory.

In a division of the Tompkins-Geers at Scioto, Chatham Light motored three-wide through the first turn for Nordin and never looked back, outgutting rivals late to win in 1:57.3. In a Goshen Cup division at The Meadowlands, this time with Bill O’Donnell in the bike, he again swooped three-wide past traffic, winning by himself in 1:56.3.

In his elimination for the \$518,000 Sheppard Pace, he and O’Donnell made another dramatic three-wide quarter-move to the front, winning in 1:59.3.

Paired with driver Mickey McNichol for the rich Sheppard final, the Niatross colt blasted to the front and held on to win by nearly a length in 1:58.2, a stakes record. “For a piece, he’s as fast as anything alive,” McNichol told *Horseman and Fair World* at the time.

Two weeks later at The Meadowlands, leaving from post nine and pacing three seconds faster than ever before, Chatham Light became mortal: Even Odds edged

past him in the 1:55.1 mile. A torturous Woodrow Wilson elim followed, in which Chatham Light was parked every step, never overcame traffic, and finished sixth.

A throat infection was diagnosed, and after a three-week respite, the Niatross colt racked up a pair of close seconds racing from behind in the Review-Little Pat at Springfield before teaming with John Campbell for the Fox Stake chase.

Albert Albert.

Starting from the second tier in his Kentucky Pacing Derby elimination heat, Chatham Light was unable to reach the front and weakened late to finish fifth in the 1:55.3 mile.

Now far from a super-horse, Chatham Light came to owner Waxman’s home province, Ontario, for the Champlain Stake at Mohawk—where he and Campbell rebounded to take the race in world-record time for two heats combined, 1:57.1 and back in 1:56.4.

“This colt is at his best in two-heat racing; he has a lot of stamina,” the jubilant Waxman told *Horseman and Fair World*.

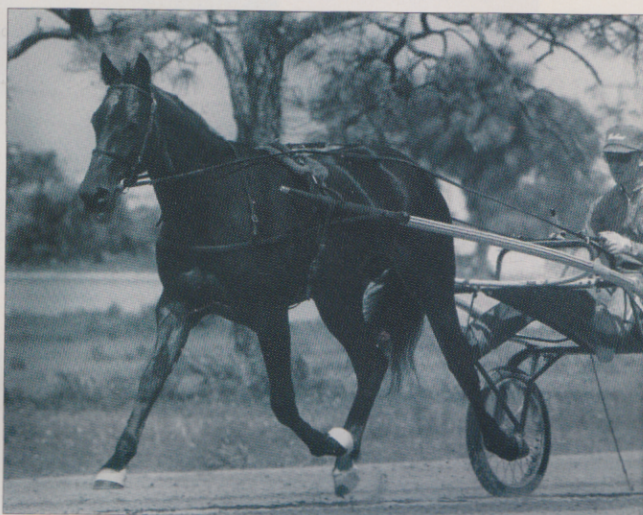
“For a quarter, he can go as fast as any horse in the country,” Campbell added.

Then, suddenly, the season was over. After an arduous 21-hour ship from Mohawk to New Jersey, Chatham Light developed a serious lung infection that resulted in a high fever and a rumor just as hot that he had actually died.

“Soren Nordin should get Trainer of the Year again,” Waxman quipped to *Harness Horse*. “He’s brought back lame ones, but this is the first time he’s brought back a dead one.”

With \$454,014 in the bank, Chatham Light was the year’s fifth-richest freshman pacer and was voted Canada’s 1987 2-Year-Old Pacing Colt of the Year.

The persistent lung infection continued to bother the colt at 3. Moved to the stable of Jim Campbell, Chatham Light paced in 1:53.3 in a July qualifier, but finished last in his North America Cup and Meadowlands Pace eliminations; the best he could manage was a second-place finish in a Hanover Colt Stake division. After only six purse starts, his season ended, and Alma-



Ed Keys

CHATHAM LIGHT				
Niatross	Albatross	Meadow Skipper	Dale Frost Countess Vivian	
		Voodoo Hanover	Dancer Hanover Vibrant Hanover	
	Niagara Dream	Bye Bye Byrd	Poplar Byrd Evalina Hanover	
		Scoot	Scamp Doris Spencer	
Miles End Brenda	Most Happy Fella	Meadow Skipper	Dale Frost Countess Vivian	
		Laughing Girl	Good Time Maxine’s Dream	
	Nib’s Sister	Specialty	Rodney Irma Hanover	
		Wilma Nib	Nibble Hanover	Nibble Hanover Wilma Scott

Pacing right down the pike, Chatham Light held off Threefold after a gruelling third-quarter battle to take his 1:54.1 elimination heat. He nabbed the early lead in the Fox final, but was shuffled back in hectic action. Attempting to rally three-wide, his last-turn dash was impeded, and he finished a distant fourth to



hurst welcomed him to its New Jersey stallion station.

With a \$1,500 fee, Chatham Light attracted 32 mares in his first year, resulting in only 15 foals. It was an inauspicious start, and in October of 1989, Waxman sent the 4-year-old stallion to the barn of Bill Robinson to resume training.

"I trained him down fast; I wanted to get him ready quick to really test him," an impressed Robinson told *Horseman and Fair World*. "He just kept amazing me."

Chatham Light qualified at Greenwood on Jan. 19 and swiftly advanced to the track's Free-For-All level. Sent to Yonkers for the George Morton Levy Memorial Pacing Series, Chatham Light made three of its legs part of his five-race winning streak that earned him March 1990 Horse of the Month honors from the USTA. He won four of nine Levy starts, and was edged in his four second-place finishes by Dorunrun Bluegrass and Robinson stablemate My Guru.

In May, Chatham Light travelled to Connaught Park in Quebec for its \$50,000 Connaught Cup. Under driver Kelly Sheppard's guidance, he led every step on the twice-around to win in 1:53.3, a new world record.

His catch-me-if-you-can game continued throughout Canadian Free-For-Alls and top-level paces, and by year's end, he

**Above:** With a late kick as well as great get-away speed, Chatham Light (4) skimmed home in 27.1 to take his Fox Stake elimination heat for John Campbell in 1:54.1, holding off Threefold (2) and Pied Piper. He was impeded in the final, finishing fourth to Albert Albert in a world-record 1:52.4 mile.

**Opposite:** Chatham Light received his early lessons at Pompano, sometimes with Team Nordin assistant trainer Markku Vartiainen in the cart. The early-blooming Niatross colt was soon pacing miles that had horsemen buzzing before he ever raced.

had a seasonal bankroll of \$299,440 and 28-12-5-3 record.

Things began to get rocky in 1991. Alternating good and bad efforts led to a three-month layoff, which saw still weaker performances when he returned. That led to nearly six months off. As 1992 dawned, Chatham Light was at Pompano, taking a pair of wins and climbing to the Open I Handicap before his lungs again slowed him down.

That was enough for the old boy, Waxman decided, and Chatham Light soon found himself standing stud at Ron Goguen's First Farm in Moncton, New Brunswick. He received 33 mares that spring.

One of his patrons was longtime Standardbred owner Romeo Boucher of Moncton; "I admire a horse with the courage to do that much," Boucher

explained. The following January, Boucher was stunned when he was told that not only was First Farm folding, but also a truck was scheduled to pick up Chatham Light at 4 p.m. that afternoon to ship him back to Waxman.

Boucher quickly got on the line to Waxman and offered \$20,000 for the 7-year-old stallion. Waxman accepted, and the deal was concluded with two hours to spare.

He may have had a stallion, but Boucher was hoping for a racehorse, too. "It was like throwing the dice, [whether] he could come back to the races," he said—and fans throughout the Maritimes were soon thanking him for his gamble.

"It was a great attraction for harness racing here to have a world champion come to their tracks," recalled Boucher. "I had people offer to pay my way. I wouldn't take any money, just take my horse and take what we could win; that's enough for me."

Trained by Boucher's son-in-law, Alain Bergeron, and driven by Gordie Hennessey (younger brother of top reinsman Wally Hennessey), Chatham Light spent the next three years combining a light breeding schedule with competition throughout the Maritimes, winning such top province Free-For-All events as Woodstock's Robert McCain Memorial three years in a row, Charlottetown's Joe




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**"He's an average-gaited horse, but his determination is beyond any horse's desire to do it right."**

—ROMEO BOUCHER

O'Brien Memorial, and Frederickton's Walter Dale Memorial.

The 15.2-hand pacer was even named 1994 Horse of the Year at Exhibition Park Raceway in Saint John, New Brunswick.

"I've been in the business 27 years and have never seen a horse with such determination," said Boucher. "He's an average-gaited horse, but his determination is beyond any horse's desire to do it right. And he could leave like a runner."

Boucher witnessed one of his greatest efforts from a backstretch vantage point. When Chatham Light, saddled with the far outside post, wasn't visible in front when the field emerged from behind the infield toteboard after the start, Boucher supposed this might be one of those rare occasions when his horse wasn't gunning for the front.

But when the starting gate came around the turn, "there he was!" Boucher remembered. "He was *beside* the starting gate, five lengths on top!"

Like many owners, Boucher enjoys an occasional turn in the jog cart, and found that Chatham Light was a gentle jogger who wore an open bridle and no overcheck, but was a tiger when turned. "He wouldn't pull dirty, but he wanted to go," he noted. "If your hand-holds weren't set in the right place, a mile in 2:08 would be a mile in 2:00."

However, problems began mounting for the stallion. "We found out that he bled some, and we aren't allowed Lasix," Boucher explained. "Sometimes Gordie said he shut down at the half but he could bluff his way to the three-quarters."

Sore front feet were also taking a toll. "I had them patched two or three times; quarter cracks and stuff," said Boucher. "For a while we had to block his feet because he was really stinging on them, but that doesn't help in the long run. We tubbed and we poulticed, but we couldn't get him without pain."

With the horse's earnings locking him into the Maritimes' Free-For-All classification, and with the stable growing with younger horses—including some of

Chatham Light's own get—Boucher made the hard decision to part with the old horse. He had Mike MacDonald race him in the \$8,000 claiming class at Windsor Raceway; when Chatham Light dropped to \$7,000 in January 1996, trainer Darrell Rideout swiftly signed the slip.

It would be another two months before Chatham Light could race again.

"The night Darrell claimed him, he was deathly sick—just dropped his head and all this gunk came out," recalled Mike Croucher. "His immune system just isn't fighting everything off. All the miles he's travelled, I guess he's got every right; it starts catching up with those old horses."

Once Chatham Light recovered, Rideout asked brother Doug to drive, and the old warrior responded with three wins in lower conditioned classes at Raceway Park.

Illness and an iffy left fore tendon stalled the horse in late summer, but his first start in five weeks saw him compete at Delaware, Ohio, with owner-trainer Rideout himself in the bike, nabbing the third-place check.

The Rideouts and Croucher have been the best of friends since the Canadian brothers came to Michigan in 1992, and two weeks after the Delaware race, it was Croucher who brought Chatham Light home to his 11½-acre farm in Ida, Mich., 20 minutes from Toledo.

"Darrell races mostly claimers, every horse has a price tag, and I just had the right one for Chatham," he said. "He looked like he could still make a decent racehorse, if you put him in the right class."

Doug Rideout, Raceway Park's leading driver in wins and earnings in 1995, was pleased to remain in the sulky. "He talks about Chatham like he's been a friend of his for 20 years," chuckled Croucher. "Doug's a big front-end driver, and that's probably why he likes him so much."

As Croucher carefully monitored Chatham Light's health, putting him on

blood-builders and working on his tender tendon, the pacer became a familiar face in the lower conditioned ranks at Raceway Park and Northville Downs. But the emergence of a nasty quarter crack in his left forefoot ended his season in early December.

"That quarter crack is a blessing in disguise," admitted his owner-trainer. "The winter's so bad, I probably would have had a tough time keeping him healthy all the time. Turning him out this winter is the best thing for him. You wouldn't think that he's 12 years old right now. He's found his youth again this year."

Chatham Light began training for his latest comeback in February, and a gratifying number of folks are rooting for him to build on his 48 lifetime wins and \$847,194 in earnings.

"Everybody seems to have a little sentimental reason to ask me how he's doing," said Croucher. "Every time I take him to the track, somebody walks up and wants to look at him and talk about him.

"Everybody remembers. They might not remember the names of the races or how fast, but they remember how much of a horse he was."

Could Chatham Light race through age 14? "He could make it; he's still enjoying it," said his admiring owner, who plans to keep him in conditioned events but not "race his guts out."

"I've got a lot of respect for him, for what he's done," said Croucher, "and he doesn't owe nobody nothing."

Meanwhile, between his single season at Almahurst and his services rendered in Canada, Chatham Light has sired five in 2:00, including last season's Maritimes sensation Chatham Hoochee p,2,1:59.3h, fastest freshman ever in the Atlantic provinces. Demand is growing—not only for Chatham Light's stallion services, but for the horse himself.

"I've had three or four people in the last month and a half ask what I'd have to have for him, and I just am not selling," said Croucher.

His resolution to keep Chatham Light is more than an homage to a past champion, deeper than a tribute to the harness warrior's depths of determination. When the charismatic bay came out to the car and thrilled a tiny new fan, it became a matter of family.

"As soon as he took a liking to my daughter like that," Croucher beamed, "he found himself a home forever." **HB**

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