

Greeted by a joyously applauding throng, Norwegian Coldblood trotter Atom Vinter and his ecstatic owner-breeder-driver-trainer, Arve Gudbrand Blihovde, keep the flag of Norway waving high after defeating trotters of other Scandinavian heavy breeds to win the Elitkamp, held on Elitlopp Day at Solvalla, Sweden.



Norway's Nation



Norwegian Coldblood trotters share racing spotlight with Standardbreds

by Ardith Carlton

They're shaggy, squat, and full of trot. They are Norway's own native trotting breed, the Norwegian Coldblood—and they fire up fans with national pride in a way few Standardbreds can.

Pony-sized and of ponderous gait, the Norwegian Coldblood trotter is a more racy descendent of Norway's draft horse, the Døle Gudbrandsdal, a breed used to work farms and forests for centuries.

When trotting races were first held in Norway in the 1830s, on the thick ice of its fjords and frozen lakes, the Døle Gudbrandsdal drafter was the horse of choice. Over time, a faster, lighter version began to develop, and by the turn of the century, the resulting Coldblood trotters were racing against imported horses of other breeds—and winning.

Separate races were established for foreign breeds soon after; today there's a similar arrangement, with events on Norwegian race cards designated for either Coldbloods or for "warmbloods," a category that includes Standardbreds.

The arrival of the Standardbred put a huge dent in the native breed's dominance.

"When the totalizator/pari-mutuel betting was legal in 1928, the Coldbloods were in great majority," explained longtime Coldblood chronicler Arne Kristiansen, a senior staffer of Norwegian racing magazine *Trav Og Galopp-Nytt*. "Since then, the import of mostly Standardbreds from the U.S.A., Sweden, and Denmark increased very much, and of course the breeding likewise. Today the [number] of Coldbloods and warmbloods is about equal.

"The Coldblood enthusiasts—they are quite numerous—have been, and still are, afraid of warmblood command. They have got into the rules a regulation saying

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that the number of races and the purse money paid out shall be approximately equal for the two breeds of horses."

Last year, 2,242 Coldbloods competed in 1,992 races, compared to 2,841 warmbloods racing in 2,296 events. While purses of 75 million kroner (\$11 million) were offered for warmbloods, Coldbloods raced for purses of 61.5 million kroner (about \$9.5 million), which created higher average purses for Coldbloods.

In a nation where the largest tracks are equivalent in size to a five-eighths-mile oval, popular distances for Coldblood races are 1,600 meters (just under one mile) and 2,100 meters (about 1 1/4 miles).

With their bushy manes, feathered legs, and stocky build, Norwegian Coldbloods could never be mistaken for their taller, more streamlined Standardbred counterparts. But another major difference between the breeds is only visible before they reach the track: Coldblood racehorses are made, not born.

Kjell Hakonsen—the man who trained and drove 1986 Elitlopp winner Rex Rodney—is one of Norway's top trainers of Coldbloods. A speedy trot is an acquired skill for Coldbloods, and the key to developing it, Hakonsen said, is slow training, "through a lot of hard, physical work."

Avoiding a Standardbred's typical fast-heats-twice-a-week training regimen—which, according to Hakonsen, would make a Coldblood go lame—slow training involves an interminable amount of walking while hooked to a heavy-wheeled wagon, often a four-wheeler.

"The Coldblood gets faster when it gets stronger," he noted.

Still another difference between the two trotting breeds is the level of participation by their owners.

"Up to the 1950s, a large number of Coldbloods were trained and driven by their owners, most of them farmers," said Kristiansen. "Today the majority of Coldbloods are still hometrained, as we say, but the professional trainer-drivers have taken over the driving of about 90 percent of the horses. I think that not more than 10-15 percent of the Coldbloods are in professional training at a trotting track."

Those owners who choose to keep

Right: Dairy farmer Knut Alm bred, raised, trained, and owns Alm Svarten, the king of Norwegian Coldbloods. The gutsy stallion raced for 13 years, earned \$1.5 million, and set the breed's speed record, while also breeding mares since age 4. At far right, Alm Svarten faced tough conditions as well as tough trotters, and his 189 lifetime wins included this 1989 victory at Biri, Norway, for driving great Ulf Thoresen.

Below: Atom Vinter was Alm Svarten's successor in the Coldblood spotlight, and also combined a racing career with breeding. The yellow dun stallion has won \$1.2 million in his continuing racing career, but was not approved to breed after 1995 due to osteochondrosis.

Trav Og Galopp-Nytt—Arild Hansen



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hold of the reins, rather than turn them over to a pro at race time, often opt to compete at smaller-level tracks, described by Coldblood owner-breeder Tina Peder-sen Brauti as the "fair" level.

"There's fair races at all kinds of different tracks, the way it is [with] fairs in New Jersey at the different training centers," she explained. "They can race every week. [There are] no pari-mutuel races at the fairs, but often nice blankets, etc., for the winning horses. Many Coldbloods start their racing career at the fairs, because the owners like to be 'on tour' from track to track."

With many of these hands-on owners being farmers, she noted, Coldbloods "can help their owners out in the fields and woods" in their youth, before making

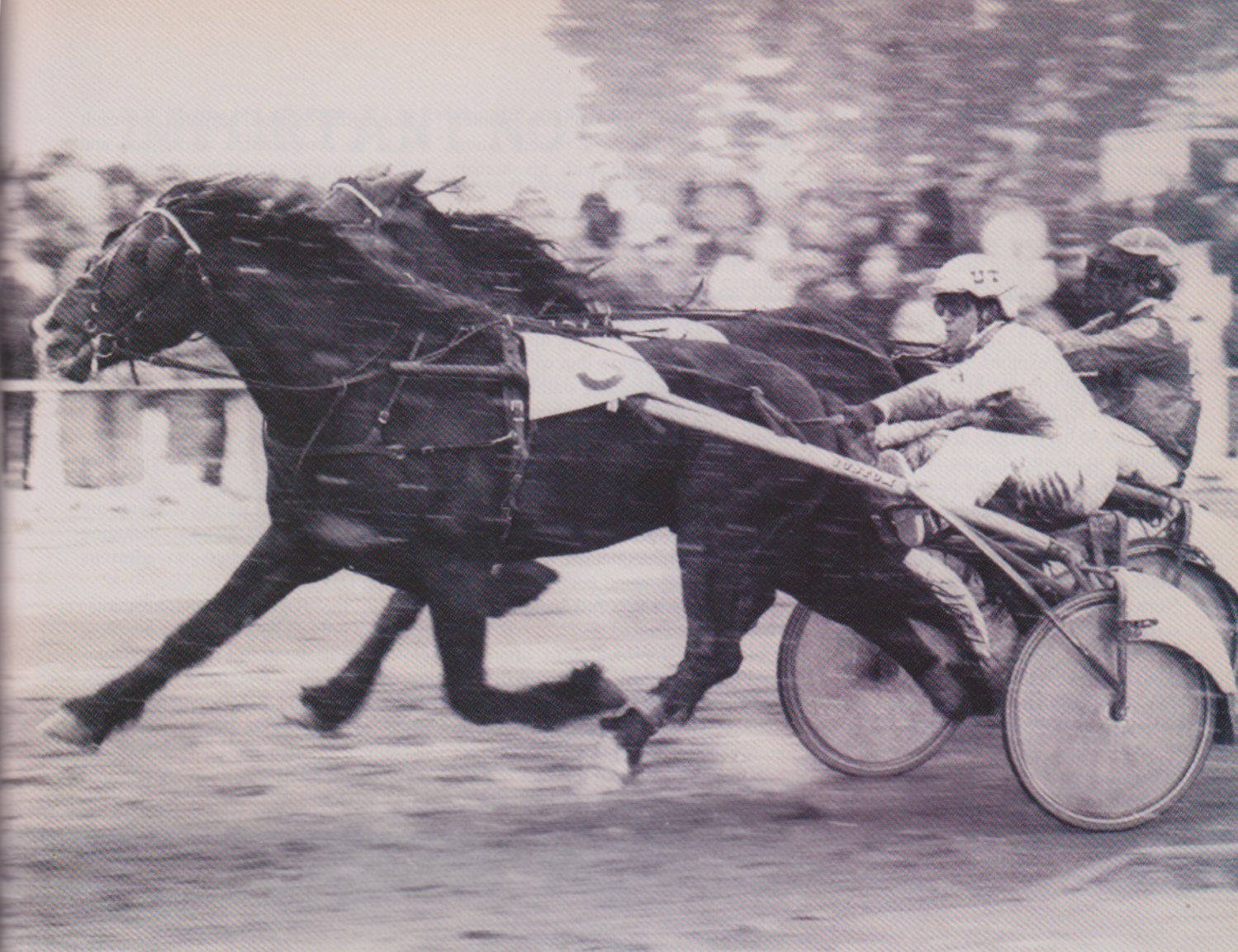
their racing debuts later in life, sometimes as late as age 8.

Although Norway now has racing for 2-year-olds—began in 1993 for both warmbloods and Coldbloods, in the interest of breed equality—the native breed's babies tend to need more time to develop, so few pursue the opportunity. The speed record for a 2-year-old Coldblood is currently a 1:35 1/10 kilometer rate (a mile rate of about 2:32.4), clocked by Lykke Gutten in 1994.

That slowness to mature, however, translates into impressive longevity as Norwegian Coldbloods age. As a result, they are allowed to race until they reach age 16.

Since Coldbloods are not the instant racehorses Standardbreds are, getting

Ulf Thoresen, who knew a thing or two about Norwegian Coldbloods, called Alm Svarten "the best horse I've ever



Trav Og Galopp-Nytt—Arlid Hansen

them gaited and balanced presents challenges that have honed the horsemanship of several who have gone on to international prominence with Standardbreds.

One is Gunnar Eggen, who gave Sugarcane Hanover one of history's most masterful drives to upset Mack Lobell and Ourasi in the 1988 March of Dimes Trot. Eggen drives about as many Coldbloods as Standardbreds, and hasn't lost his feel for what makes a Coldblood tick.

"Because the Coldbloods do not have the fluent trot that the Standardbred has, they have to be 'carried' a lot more," said Brauti. "Gunnar Eggen is known as a great Coldblood driver. He is almost unbeatable the last 200 meters of a race, because he gets the horse's attention and manages to wake it up like no one else."

Another alumni of the Coldblood school of physical education was the late Ulf Thoresen, victor in the World Driving Championship in 1973, '77, '79, and '81. Long before he captured both the '86 Hambletonian in straight heats with Nuclear Kosmos and the '86 Roosevelt International with Habib, Thoresen entered the world of trotting in his Norway homeland with Coldbloods. Like Eggen, he drove both breeds, and his champions include the all-time titan of Coldbloods, Alm Svarten.

Alm Svarten, the fastest and winningest Norwegian Coldblood ever, finished his epic 13-year career last year. Before it was done, he captured 189 races, amassed a bankroll of \$1.5 million, and clocked the fastest kilometer rate the

breed has seen, 1:21⁵/₁₀ (a 2:11.2f mile rate). In addition, he had his own fan club and a song written in his honor.

Thoresen, who knew a thing or two about world-class trotters, called him "the best horse I've ever driven, regardless of breed or country."

Standing just under 15 hands, Alm Svarten was never entered in either of the breed's top two stakes—the Norwegian Trotting Kriterium for 3-year-olds Coldbloods and the Norwegian Coldblood Trotting Derby for 4-year-olds, both held at Bjerke, home of the Oslo Grand Prix—by his owner-breeder-trainer, dairy farmer Knut Alm. But the feisty brown stallion sent his countrymen's hearts soaring with perennial gutsy performances in top-level Coldblood competition during interna-

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tional Grand Circuit meets.

"He has more wins during the Oslo Grand Prix and Elitlopp meetings than any other Coldblood," said Brauti with admiration. "Maybe more than any other horse, because there are not many horses that come back again and again to win during these meetings."

Alm Svarten began breeding mares as a 4-year-old, combining the stud duties with his racing exploits. A persistent suspensory problem in his right foreleg forced his retirement from the racetrack last year, so his energies are now devoted full time to his already superb stud career.

Hot on Alm Svarten's heels came his "nephew," the eye-grabbing yellow dun stallion Atom Vinter. Sired by Alm Svarten's three-quarter brother, Alm Rigel, Atom Vinter won the 2,600-meter Norwegian Coldblood Trotting Derby in a stakes-record kilometer rate of 1:30⁷/₁₀ (2:25.2f mile rate) with owner-breeder-trainer Arve Gudbrand Blihove—also a dairy farmer—in the bike, and went on to become a top Free-For-All performer.

Atom Vinter and Blihove achieved an unforgettable distinction in 1994 when the pair took part in the opening cere-

monies for the Lillehammer Winter Olympics. As the crowd roared, Atom Vinter motored along with his human partner ski-joring in his wake.

Now age 12, with over \$1.2 million in earnings in his continuing race career, Atom Vinter began serving mares at age 3, and has sired the last three Norwegian Coldblood Trotting Derby winners in a row. However, after breeding his last full book in 1995, the yellow dun wonder was not approved as a breeding stallion for the 1996 season due to osteochondrosis, a possibly hereditary bone and joint problem.

"Coldblood stallions are approved for breeding by a special breeding commission appointed by the trotting and the state authorities," explained Kristiansen. "If the stallion is sound and fit for races, he will be started in a full scale besides his breeding activities."

Coldbloods are bred most often by natural cover, and some serve up to 100 mares a year.

Norwegian Coldbloods and the breed from which they sprang, Døle Gudbrandsdal drafters, may be bred together to produce a Coldblood. But if a Coldblood and

a Standardbred should be mated, the result would be considered a warmblood and have to compete against Standardbreds.

On average, today's Norwegian Coldbloods trot within 15 seconds of Standardbreds. They're far more competitive with the heavy trotting breeds that hail from Sweden and Finland—the Swedish Coldblood and the Finnish Trotter—and special events are passionately contested for national bragging rights.

One of these events, the Vintilla Trot is held in Biri, Norway, and is actually a pair of contests. The stellar field competes on a Friday at about 1¹/₄ miles, then returns two days later to race at a mile. Other international Coldblood events are also held at tracks in Sweden, including the Elitkamp, contested on glorious Elitlopp Day at Solvalla.

With the flags of the combatants' nations wildly waving above the overflow crowd, the heavy horses from each country duke it out in a battle of the breeds. The winner, to the delight and boisterous pride of Norwegian racing fans and horsemen, is often one of their nation's own Coldbloods—Norway's national treasure. **HB**

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