







Bill Augustine trades  
bikes for blueberries

# Coming Full Circle

by Chris Tully

**T**he path that leads to harness racing glory takes many different twists and turns. Some find themselves immersed in Standardbreds by a turn of fate—far too serendipitous to pinpoint.

Others, like the energetic co-owner of 2012 Hambletonian champion Market Share, Bill Augustine, come full circle.

Born in Philadelphia two decades prior to the bicentennial, William J. Augustine Sr. and family have lived and worked farmland in Atlantic County, N.J., since the early 1960s. The first Augustine Farm is located just beyond the outskirts of Hammonton, the self-described “Blueberry Capital of the World.”

Spread over approximately 100 square miles of South Jersey, there are well over 20,000 acres of blueberry farmland in and around Hammonton. Nestled amongst the pine barrens, this sandy, nutrient-rich soil lends itself well to blueberry agriculture. Nonetheless, Augustine and family cultivated Standardbreds long before the first Winners Circle Blueberry bush was planted.





**ONE-TWO PUNCH:** The Winners Circle Blueberries label features a photo of last year's Hambletonian winner, Market Share (whom Augustine co-owns), plus a QR code and Web address that link customers to information about harness racing as well as the health benefits of blueberries.



"We have been training horses in Hammonton for over 40 years," noted the horseman-turned-blueberry farmer.

At the tender age of 10, Augustine started driving ponies on Friday and Saturday nights, racing for blue ribbons on the local pony-racing circuit. Realizing that the ponies could not earn their keep, his family bought their first harness horse when Augustine was just 13 years old.

Bill's father, Pius Augustine, went to the Harrisburg, Pa., sale and bought a few broodmares during the late 1960s and early '70s. Over the course of the next few decades, utilizing the

"Augustus" moniker, the family bred about 40 racehorses. These homebreds raced locally in the New Jersey Sire Stakes around Freehold, as well as at neighboring Brandywine and Liberty Bell in those tracks' twilight years.

"In 1979, a homebred trotting mare named Claire Augustus gave me my first driving win at Freehold," said Augustine. "It was just my second lifetime start. I only had my 'P' license at the time. It's safe to say that I was hooked on harness racing at that point."

Augustine continued driving in matinee races at Cowtown and Johnson's Park, working toward his "A" license.

As a result, he hung around the tracks for another 15 years, garnering 38 driving wins in 470 starts.

As the long and laborious racing seasons continued, Augustine was running a bulldozer on the family farm during the day, and shipping to tracks such as Yonkers, the Meadowlands and Garden State by night—often working for 20 hours each day.

Over time, an interesting phenomenon caught his attention.

"All my neighbors had shiny new trucks and I was driving an old, beat-up pick-up," he said. "I started asking

## “Just like racing horses, growing the blueberry business

around, and found out that blueberries were very profitable. Everyone was driving new blueberry cars and new blueberry trucks. They had a nice way of life. These folks worked the summers and had the winters off, and they always had a few dollars in their pockets.

“When I was younger, I used to grow pepper plants and tomatoes, so I was very interested in how things grow and working with the land. Kind of like a dirt farmer. And being a horse trainer and a driver, I always had dirt in my face.

“Then I thought, perhaps I need to supplement my income. The expenses are high for breeding, raising and training equine athletes. At the end of the year, we were always scraping to pay our bills. Basically, we had a lot of homebreds, and we would buy cheap horses at Harrisburg. We didn’t have much stock. We would struggle with \$10,000 and \$20,000 claimers.”

**D**uring the mid-1990s, Augustine was involved in a racing mishap in a qualifier at Freehold. He became unseated, was run over by trailing horses, and broke four ribs. Shortly thereafter, he decided to concentrate on building his blueberry business. His first blueberry bush was planted with a wheelbarrow and shovel on a 40-acre plot. As his farming grew and expanded to 300 berry-production acres, Augustine was forced to hire trainers to manage his stock for him.

“At that time,” Augustine noted, “I was not as actively involved as I once was. I did not have the same control as when I trained and drove the horses myself. I got frustrated with paying all those training bills with little or no return.

“That is why I stepped away for a while, just to take a rest. I still loved the sport, but I could not devote the time it takes to succeed. Just like racing horses, growing the blueberry business required all of my time and attention.”

While he may have left racing behind, he honored his heritage when naming his



**EXPANSION:** Currently, Augustine Farms, Inc. is the largest single-family-owned and -operated blueberry production and packing enterprise on the East Coast, boasting 1,200 acres between its New Jersey and North Carolina operations. *Above:* A bird’s-eye view of the North Carolina farm. *Right:* Augustine utilizes a helicopter to dry the morning dew off of berries to enable earlier picking. *Below:* He checks the health of a blueberry plant slated for harvest next year.



**required all of my time and attention.”** —Bill Augustine





**DEVOTED:** After dropping out of harness racing for several years to manage his expanding blueberry business, Augustine has returned with a vengeance. Above, he often sponsors overnight races at the Meadowlands when his colts are racing. Right, he warms up a colt before the 2-year-old races at the Meadowlands. Below, Meadowlands announcer Sam McKee interviews him for a “Fan of the Week” segment.



burgeoning business.

“When I started out with the blueberries, about 25 years ago, I didn’t really have a good name,” he said. “I called it Blue Ribbon Blueberries. A blue ribbon is first place, and I used to pony race for blue ribbons as a kid.

“I used that name for a few years and then I realized that I could also advertise for harness racing. That is when I decided to change the product name to Winners Circle Blueberries. It was a good way for me to give back to harness racing. I could promote the sport by placing a harness horse logo on the label.”

**F**rom a modest beginning, Augustine’s Winners Circle Blueberries empire has grown so large that his label maker calls him the “Donald Trump of Blueberries.” Currently, his Augustine Farms, Inc. is the largest single-family-owned and -operated blueberry production and packing enterprise on the East Coast, amassing 1,200 acres between its New Jersey and North Carolina operations.

More than 5 million packages of Winners Circle Blueberries are sold every season, each with an image of a harness horse on the label. This year, the enhanced package comes complete with a full-color picture featuring last season’s Dan Patch 3-year-old trotting colt champion, Market Share.

“I love to bring harness racing into millions of homes each year,” Augustine said. “My new label shows a magnificent horse, and inside are my delicious blueberries.”

Winners Circle Blueberries is expanding throughout North America, said Augustine.

“We service 50-60 different supermarket chains as far south as Publix in Florida, all the way north to Loblaw’s in Canada,” he said. “We send a truckload to Canada every day during the season. We are all over—our berries are in Kroger and Jungle Jim’s in Cincinnati. We also ship to one of the finest upscale

## “Harness racing has been in my blood since I was 10. I want

# Racing Memories

Like all horsemen, Bill Augustine has his favorite racing memories.

One took place at the famed Brandywine Raceway, when “a B.G.’s Bunny filly named Beatrix was 119 to 1,” he recalled. “The favorite, Bohemian Fox, broke coming out of the gate. I sat third, circled the field, and won by a length. That 3-year-old pacing filly paid \$235 to win. I remember that race like it was last night.”

Like many horsemen, one of his favorite success stories involves John Campbell.

Augustine has a soft spot in his heart for a 4-year-old mare named Wannas Fame. He campaigned her throughout her only year of racing, 1992. Leading up to the Comforter series, Augustine noted that he nursed her along by swimming her, as she had a “warm” leg. For the first two legs, Augustine drove the mare himself, raced her easy, and finished third in both starts. In her last start she threw a shoe, and Augustine did not feel that he had driven her as well as he should have.

As the horses pulled up after the Meadowlands finish wire, driver John Campbell pulled up next to Augustine. Augustine looked over at the Hall of Famer and said, “Hey John, do you want to drive this mare next week?”

“I’ll give her a whirl,” he answered.

Wannas Fame was 12th on the list following that second leg, and the final allowed for just 10 horses. Augustine dropped the mare in for the third leg with John Campbell listed to drive.

When the overnight sheet came out, Campbell was listed to drive every horse in the race.

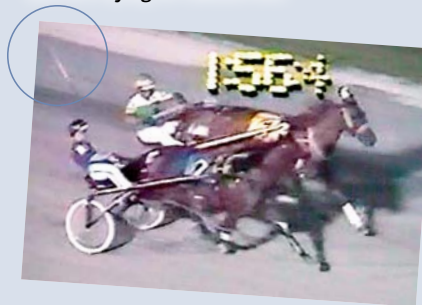
“When I saw that race listed on the sheet, I thought that John

Campbell would never, ever pick my mare. There were other mares in the race that he had already won with. So I called the race office to ask about my options for other drivers.”

Struggling to hold back his emotions, he added: “I could not believe my ears, the race secretary said, ‘John Campbell picked your horse.’”



**WANT FAME?:** Four-year-old mare Wannas Fame provided Augustine with some thrills in 1992, including (above) this Comforter Series win with John Campbell at the lines (Augustine is in the grey jacket), and a stretch drive duel at Yonkers in which Augustine’s whip locked with Jim Morrill Jr.’s, sending Morrill’s flying off behind him.



“In the paddock I told John that we needed a win to make the final. I had been racing her easy, from back off the pace. In the third leg, John left out of the 8 hole, went right to the top, drew off and won by  $6\frac{3}{4}$  lengths. The next week, we drew post 7 in the \$43,250 final. John came second over and won by  $2\frac{1}{2}$  lengths,” a sentimental Augustine recalled.

Wannas Fame wasn’t done providing Augustine with lifetime memories.

“After the Meadowlands closed in August, I had to go to Yonkers to get Wannas Fame raced,” he said. “While driving that mare in her first start on a half-mile track, Jim Morrill Jr. came at me at the half. He is one of the best drivers in the world, and he wanted the top. I kept him parked out to the three-quarter pole and through the last turn, where he tried to cut in front of me.”

“I hollered to him, ‘Jimmy, get your wheel away from my horse’s leg.’ He looked down, grabbed the right line and he stopped whipping. He was whipping and driving because he wanted the front really bad.

He knew if I hung him out in the last turn it would be a real challenge to win the race. He pulled back on the right line and it gave me just enough horse to come up next to him.

“We came around the last turn as a team and entered the stretch. Side by side, we both opened up eight lengths on the field. I was whipping with my right hand; Jimmy was whipping with his left hand. Our whips became entangled and I accidentally extracted Jimmy’s whip from his left hand. The whip went flying over his head and landed on the track. We were about 25 feet from the wire and I won the race—probably because he was whipless at the wire.”

Following that season, Augustine decided to breed his pride and joy. As a result, Wannas Fame produced six foals—four fillies, from five different sires, all of which took records of 2:01.2 or faster. Her best offspring, an Artiscap mare named Famed Artist p, 1:53.4f (\$221,506), was a solid raceway campaigner who slugged it out for eight years with 26 wins in 208 starts.

to do everything I can to help promote it. ” —Bill Augustine





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## Coming Full Circle

stores in New Jersey. It's called Wegmans and they call me every day. They want their berries picked in the morning and shipped to the stores by the end of the day. We really hustle to accomplish that."

Augustine is excited about the prospect of getting his blueberries, and by extension, his harness racing labels, into

more and more households. Packages ship all across North America, but also into Europe. He branched out into North Carolina about 10 years ago and intends to double his production volume and sales by the year 2015. Augustine is cultivating nearly 1,000 acres in southeast North Carolina.

## Back in the Game

The vast majority of horse owners at the Grand Circuit level are not fully licensed trainer-drivers. Even fewer can claim they won the Hambletonian 30 years after driving a 100-1 shot to victory at Brandywine.

Nonetheless, Bill Augustine got a call from TLP Stable's Lou Pontone that would change his foreseeable future. He had always told Pontone—a longtime friend—that if something good came along, he was eager to get back into the horse business.

Four days before the 2012 Hambletonian, Pontone called and told him that a percentage of a horse that was considered a "Hambo hopeful" was available. The next day, Augustine took a ride to Showplace Farm and met with eventual 2012 Trainer of the Year, Linda Toscano.

Before the day was over, Augustine

owned a piece of Market Share.

Following that gutsy win in the final of the Hambletonian, the colt went on to win the Zweig, Canadian Trotting Classic, American-National, Galt—and Dan Patch divisional honors.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Augustine went out and purchased a half-dozen yearlings last fall. He spent many mornings training and jogging his babies and even won while driving a 2-year-old in a matinee race at Pinehurst, N.C., in March. He was often seen warming up his colts at the 2-year-old races in June at Meadowlands Racetrack.

When his horses compete at the Meadowlands, he sponsors a race and brings enough packages of blueberries for every patron in the clubhouse. It is safe to say that Augustine is still hooked on harness racing—and has certainly come full circle.



### **WINNING TEAM:**

Augustine (third from right) celebrates with other Market Share connections at the 2013 Dan Patch Awards, including trainer Linda Toscano (second from left) and driver Tim Tetrick (green shirt).

Due to the warmer regional climate, the North Carolina farm has allowed Augustine to get blueberries into stores a month earlier than his New Jersey varieties. This goes a long way toward keeping his customers supplied with his blueberries through a longer picking season. The interactive label hopes to accomplish even more.

“With our new packaging, we hope to bring harness racing to people who may not otherwise be exposed to the sport,” Augustine said. “Consumers have become increasingly savvy about the products they buy, and many of them turn to the Internet for more information about their purchases. It is our intention to utilize the power and reach of the Internet to educate our customers, not only to inform them about the tremendous health benefits of blueberries, but also to introduce them to the great sport of harness racing.”

**T**o achieve this, the updated blueberry package label contains a quick response, or QR, code that allows smart phone users to scan the code and be immediately linked to [WinnersCircleBlueberries.com](http://WinnersCircleBlueberries.com). From that site, which is loaded with pictures of the blueberry farms, packing houses, and Bill’s horses, Web browsers can then link to racing industry sites such as [USTrotting.com](http://USTrotting.com), [USHWA.org](http://USHWA.org) and [Hambletonian.org](http://Hambletonian.org). Fans can also like Augustine’s Facebook page and check out his YouTube channel, which features video of the blueberry operations as well as harness racing footage.

“Harness racing has been in my blood since I was 10,” Augustine said. “I want to do everything I can to help promote it. Now that I own horses again, I plan on leveraging my distribution to help raise awareness for Standardbreds.”

**CHRIS TULLY** is a freelance writer living in New York. He is the first vice president of the U.S. Harness Writers Association, and performs graphic design and marketing for a variety of industry organizations, including [Winners Circle Blueberries](http://Winners Circle Blueberries). ■ To comment on this story, e-mail us at [readerforum@ustrotting.com](mailto:readerforum@ustrotting.com).

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