

## Steve Rybka loves the competition of harness racing

Tuesday, February 20, 2018 - by Ken Weingartner, USTA Media Relations Manager

**Hightstown, NJ** --- Steve Rybka had driven in several races in his young harness racing career prior to his trip around Monticello Raceway on Jan. 3 with Rockintheniteaway, but he had never experienced feelings on the racetrack like he did that afternoon.

"I got goose bumps at the three-quarter pole," the 22-year-old Rybka said. "I came second over and once I tipped her and cleared, I was thinking I was going to win. It was a different feeling. I got butterflies in my stomach."

Rybka guided Rockintheniteaway to a 2-1/4 length win that afternoon, at odds of 28-1, for his first career victory as a driver. The New York native had three wins as a trainer in 2017, all with Cruzing Hill at Saratoga.

"I was just really happy, and happy with the horse," Rybka said about his driving triumph. "She was 28-1, but I was happy with how she was training and thought she had a shot that day. It was definitely a cool feeling. I'll never forget it, that's for sure."

Rybka, who lives in upstate New York about 20 miles south of Albany, followed his father, Darren Rybka Sr., and brother, Darren Rybka Jr., into the sport.

"I was at the barn all the time growing up," Rybka said. "Once I got out of high school, I worked for a year and then I came back and started working for a bunch of people (in harness racing) again. It's pretty addicting.

"I pretty much wanted to do this my whole life. I always wanted to have a stable of my own."

Rybka is training two horses in addition to trying to make it as a driver. He has driven at Monticello and Saratoga, posting one win, three seconds and four thirds in 16 lifetime starts.

"Driving is what I want to do," Rybka said. "I'd like to have my own horses too, maybe four or five, a small stable. But I definitely want to be a catch driver.

"It's not going to happen overnight. Saratoga is not an easy place to start, but I've got to give it a shot. I just want to get my name out there. Maybe I can get a couple shots and have some success. I just want to put a good image out there and do my best for everybody."

Rybka played football and basketball in high school and enjoys the competitiveness of racing.



*Photo courtesy of Steve Rybka*

**Steve Rybka got his first win as a driver on Jan. 3 at Monticello with Rockintheniteaway.**

"It reminds me of playing sports," Rybka said. "I get the same feeling when I get on the track, the adrenaline rush. When you get into a race, it's really unbelievable."

Rybka and Rockintheniteaway will be in action again Thursday at Saratoga. He is hoping to drive more often as the year progresses and gain valuable experience.

"I think I can handle a horse pretty well and I get along with them," Rybka said. "I try to drive smart. I can read a program pretty good; I can handicap a race. And I feel like I can put horses in good spots and give them a good trip. But every single horse is different. The more you sit behind, the more you're going to learn."

"If I drive 10 horses next week and every one of them has the eight hole, that doesn't bother me because I'm still learning. Any drive is a drive. It doesn't matter if I'm driving the favorite or if I'm driving 99-1. I just love the competition. And I love the animals. They're cool animals and they're fun to be around. They definitely give you a lot of memories you won't forget."