

Cosequin Presents OTTB Showcase: Going Home at Last

by [Jen Roytz](#)
PaulickReport.com



Tom Curtin and his beloved Nassau

We've all heard stories about people finding long-lost relatives, or losing a beloved dog or cat, only to become reunited with them years later. These stories can run the gamut from gut-wrenching and tear-jerking to heart-warming and hard to believe. They remind us that sometimes life and fate have a funny way of working themselves out over time, and that sometimes miracles may just happen.

This is one of those stories.

Thewaytogo came from modest beginnings. Bred by the Oklahoma Horseshoeing School, he was consigned as a two-year-old in 1997 and purchased for \$800 by Jesse Trotter. The gelding was big, but he was precocious and by the spring was showing promise of good things to come.

He won his second start at the maiden special weight level for owner/trainer Trotter, and by the end of his juvenile year, Thewaytogo was a stakes winner and several times stakes-placed.

Trotter loved the horse and treated him with kindness and meticulous care. Thewaytogo ran 29 times and turned Trotter's initial investment of \$800 into winnings of over \$80,000.

In 2000, when the gelding was at the point that allowance races were no longer an option, Trotter, now in his mid-eighties, looked to find him a good home and placed him on a farm that worked with disadvantaged children.

Two years later, a gentleman named Tom Curtin was looking for a Quarter Horse gelding to use for ranch work. He came across a small classified ad for a 17.2 hand Thoroughbred, and though the horse was not what Curtin was looking for, he was intrigued by the horse's size and scheduled an appointment to see him.

“Just a few minutes in the stall with him, and I knew he had to come home with me,” said Curtin. “I instantly fell in love.”

Curtin called him Nassau and soon found that even though the horse had little to no experience with ranch work, Nassau worked and roped cows with the best of them. Curtin took him to parades, and the horse became his ambassador for off-track Thoroughbreds long before the OTTB movement gained popularity. Nassau was truly the love of Tom's life.

But in 2008, an unfortunate set of circumstances forced Curtin to relocate back to his home state of Massachusetts. He looked and looked but was unable to find a place to board Nassau that he could afford, so he found a family in New York who would care for him, under the condition that Curtin would come and get him as soon as he could.

Curtin stayed in regular contact with the family for six months. Then, out of nowhere, the family, and Nassau, disappeared. Tom searched for Nassau for years, but to no avail, and he finally, grudgingly, came to the heartbreaking conclusion that he would never see his beloved horse again.

It was 2012 and Dottie Harrison, currently the Vice President of Fallen Horses, a non-profit equine rescue, rehabilitation and adoption organization based in Reno, Nev., was looking for a horse for her family. She found an ad on Craigslist from the Del Mar Cattle Ranch in Nevada for several horses for sale and made an appointment to look them over.

One of the horses at the ranch was a big, rangy, 17.2 hand horse, and while he seemed kind enough, Harrison felt he wasn't the right fit for her family due to his size. She visited the ranch several times that month and on her way out to the farm one day, the owner called to let her know that the "big horse" had injured his eye and would be put down upon the owner's return.

Harrison rushed to the horse's aid once she arrived at the ranch and began treating the eye daily with antibiotic ointment and pain medicine. She implored the owner not to put the horse down due to his eye, and after much back and forth, the owner simply gave her the gelding in disgust.

Harrison moved the Thoroughbred to her in-laws' farm and renamed him Buster. His eye healed, and the family soon found him to be the perfect horse that they'd been searching for.

Eventually, however, Buster began losing weight, and no amount of feed and nutritional and gastric supplements would help. Eventually he coliced, and with one of her children recently diagnosed with autism and her husband temporarily out of work on disability leave, the family simply could not afford the expensive and regularly occurring vet calls.

Harrison reached out to Fallen Horses founder, Tracie Hutmier, and together they used social media to raise the money to transport Buster to Tracie in California so she could work with him. With her vet's assistance, Hutmier soon found the cause of Buster's weight loss - approximately 80 pounds of sand in his gut.

"Our vet came out and determined that he was full of sand. We talked about the sand and how to handle it and started him immediately on a "no hay" diet," explained Hutmier. "It was amazing to see the transformation."

Buster went from weighing just 937 pounds to more than 1,150 pounds. His coat began to gleam, and his personality started to shine through. Before long, he was the favorite of everyone at the Fallen Horses facility.

Thrilled to show Harrison the horse's turnaround, Hutmier took some photos and emailed them to her friend.

It was the end of 2013 and Harrison was chatting online with Emmie Ewing, a new horse-inclined friend she'd met on social media. The topic of off-track Thoroughbreds came up, and Harrison told Ewing about the plight of her 18-year-old Thoroughbred named Buster.

Ewing commented that the stories reminded her so much of her fiancé's old horse named Nassau. The more the women discussed the horse, the more they started getting the feeling they were talking about the same horse.

"Dottie sent her the photos," said Fallen Horses Chief Financial Officer Victoria Hardesty, who originally contacted the Paulick Report's OTTB Showcase about the story. "Emmie took the photos to Tom. When he looked closely at the third one, he broke down. He was looking at Nassau, and his horse was alive and well after all those years."

The way to go's identity was confirmed by his Jockey Club tattoo.

"When Dottie and I were discussing our horses, she began telling me of her horse that was an OTTB trained to work cows," said Ewing. "That's what led me to ask more questions, and each time I got the same answer from both Dottie and Tom. There are currently 2.9 million horses in the U. S. Tom was highly skeptical because, really, what are the chances?"

The horse and the chances defied all odds, but it was truly him, and to Tom, it was simply a miracle.

"On February 5, 2014, Buster had an early breakfast," said Hardesty. "He was brushed for the final time at Fallen Horses in Pinon Hills. Don Buckner of Redmond, Ore., arrived with his rig. With hugs and kisses, Buster was loaded for the trip. Those of us left watching the trailer leave the driveway had tears in our eyes and joy in our hearts for this wonderful horse. He was going home at last."

After numerous pick-ups and drop-offs of various horses around the country, and a delay due to the horrendous winter weather near Washington D. C., Buster finally arrived in Granby, Mass., on February 12. Ewing greeted him with warm blankets and lots of love, as Curtin was away on business.

Two days later, Curtin and Nassau were reunited on Valentine's Day.

"Today, Nassau is enjoying a semi-retired life in his New England country setting," said Ewing. "He's shedding his winter fluff and enjoying the small patches of green grass popping up. We

celebrated his 19th birthday on April 7th and, just yesterday (April 14th), Tom rode him for the second-first time.ö

THE DEETS:

Name: Thewaytogo (a.k.a. öNassauö and öBusterö)

Born: April 7, 1995

Color: Bay

Sire: Haymarket (GB)

Dam: Ah Me

Sale History: Sold at the Heritage Place Winter Mixed Sale as a two-year-old in 1997 for \$800

Race Record: 29-3-2-6

Earnings: \$82,276; 1st in the No More Hard Times S.; 2nd in the Norman S., 3rd in the Brother Brown S., Great West S., Clever Trevor S., Prairie Gold Juvenile S.

If you have or know of a retired Thoroughbred with an interesting story to tell, we'd love to hear about it! Just email Jen Roytz (Jenlroytz@gmail.com) with the horse's Jockey Club name, background story, and a few photos. Contact Jen on Facebook and Twitter.