Against the Odds: Racing for Melanoma Research

After losing his dad and uncle to melanoma, Patrick O'Neill raises awareness and funding around the disease through horseracing.

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"Life is about chasing experiences," says, Patrick O'Neill. "People, friendships, memories—they're everything."

And what an experience it has been. At a mere 28-years-old, Patrick along with his four closest college friends and fellow Boat Racing, LLC members, find themselves in a very implausible position: first-time horse owners heading to the Kentucky Derby—horseracing's pinnacle event.

Patrick and his friends are the proverbial underdogs, but the same could be said about their horse Hot Rod Charlie. It took "Chuck", as Patrick and his friends affectionately call him, four tries before breaking his maiden—a horseracing term for winning for the first time. Chuck's fifth race, in the highly regarded Breeder's Cup Juvenile, had an entry fee of $60,000 and the Boat Racing crew knew he'd be a significant long shot. After crunching the numbers and having multiple late-night calls with Chuck's other owners, the group agreed that it made sense to take a chance. Little did the crew know that by post time Hot Rod Charlie would end up being the longest shot in the field with his odds ballooning to a whopping 94-1. Moreover, Chuck drew the dreaded outside lane.

But Chuck bucked the odds-makers in a race that came down to the wire—placing second by less than a length to the current favorite for the Kentucky Derby. Next came the Robert B. Lewis Stakes at Santa Anita. This time, Chuck placed in a photo finish—only losing by a head. With momentum on their side, they took the Louisiana Derby by storm: winning the race, setting a track record for the distance, and receiving an invitation to horseracing's Holy Grail: the Kentucky Derby.

Despite growing up around horseracing—an often buttoned-up, tradition-laden sport—Patrick unabashedly lives and celebrates in the moment. "The typical Kentucky Derby owner does not jump into each other and hug at full speed after wins," he admits. This type of youthful enthusiasm has been a welcomed change for Hot Rod Charlie's more seasoned and majority-share owners—Bill Strauss and Roadrunner Racing—whom Patrick says have been incredibly gracious and accepting of him and his friends, as well as the energy they bring.

Patrick's live-in-the-moment mantra is informed not only by youth but by an acute awareness of

just how fleeting life can be. Patrick's uncle died of melanoma at the age of 38 and Patrick's father passed away from the disease at age 57.

In a true testament of their character, it was Patrick's friends—Alex, Dan, Eric, and Reiley—who first brought up the idea of a donation. They wanted to thank Patrick for bringing them together again, for introducing them to the sport, and for this very privileged and humbling experience they're having. That "something," should they win at the Kentucky Derby or any future race run by Chuck, will be a sixth of their winnings to the Melanoma Research Alliance (MRA) in honor of Patrick's father and uncle, whom they affectionately call their "sixth man."

The sixth man is a basketball metaphor. This person is not a starter but, rather, the first man off the bench. He's often the unsung hero, the hustle guy, the one you tag in when the team is flat and you need that extra spark to go from good to great.

And great is, indeed, what Hot Rod Charlie and this experience have proven to be. Patrick admits, "It's all happening very quickly. We were rightfully nobodies in this sport. We were barely making ends meet before Hot Rod Charlie, and now we're having this pinch-me experience with this once-in-a-lifetime horse. We know we're very fortunate, and we want to use this unexpected platform to give back."

Although they knew they wanted to raise awareness and funding around melanoma, the logistics were less clear. Patrick set off on his research which led him to several organizations but, among them, MRA rose to the top. In particular, Patrick was impressed with

- MRA's $123 million to date in melanoma funding
- 100% of MRA donations supporting melanoma research
- Founder Debra Black's personal experience with this disease, and
- President and CEO Michael Kaplan and Director of Development Carolyn Ricci's exuberance and passion for fighting the disease.

"I know my Dad would be proud of my partnering with MRA and everything that MRA is doing day in and day out," says Patrick.

Patrick also underscores the importance of regular prevention skin checkups. "Melanoma can be solved either through prevention or through the breakthrough research that the Melanoma Research Alliance is working on," he explains. Nevertheless, melanoma remains the deadliest form of skin cancer, is rising rapidly in young people, and has more than tripled in the last 30 years despite declines in other cancers.

Patrick, who is half-Filipino, says, "I want people to know that it's not just people who have fair skin that get melanoma. I've had at least five or six pre-melanoma moles removed." Indeed, early detection and practicing sun safety are meaningful and critical ways to help turn the tide and

defeat the melanoma odds.

And defeating the odds is what Patrick and his “band of brothers” and their underdog-turned-leaderboard horse Hot Rod Charlie plan to do. Indeed, it’s been a wild ride for everyone: Greg Helm and his Roadrunner Racing partners, majority share owners and longtime figures in racing, had never owned a yearling before Chuck. Doug O’Neill, Patrick’s uncle, started at the bottom working in the stable before he climbed the ranks and made a name for himself as a trainer; should Chuck win, this will be the trifecta of his Kentucky Derby horses.

Perhaps it is no surprise given this unlikely journey, along with horseracing’s pomp and circumstance, that people from across the spectrum of Patrick’s life—and indeed the lives of all of the owners—have reached out in one way or another. There is not a single person, however, that they have not reached back out to.

The most memorable, perhaps, is a man from Louisville, Kentucky who reached out via email. The man shared a story about his young son named Charlie who passed away. He inquired whether Patrick and his friends had an extra Hot Rod Charlie hat that they could part with. Patrick took it up a notch: “We said, since we’re going to be in Louisville, why don’t we meet up, provide you multiple hats, and have you and your family actually pet Hot Rod Charlie in person.”

This kind of generosity seems to define Patrick and his friends. Despite their assumed rowdiness, they appear wise beyond their years, introspective, and grateful. They’ve experienced so much of their formative years together and created Boat Racing, LLC as a way to fill the void left after college and post-Brown Football retirement. They share a kind of fraternal love and know that not just this experience, but this experience together, may never come around again. In short, they aren’t taking anything for granted.

In an unlikely but fitting way, May 1st will be a kind of homecoming: More than 150 friends and family from all across the country will descend upon Churchill Downs Racetrack for the big day. It also marks the beginning of Melanoma Awareness Month—perfect for a race honoring Patrick’s dad and uncle and seeking to do just that: raise melanoma awareness. Kentucky also marks the birthplace of none other than Hot Rod Charlie.

The Kentucky Derby, often dubbed “The Most Exciting Two Minutes in Sports,” will bring Hot Rod Charlie to face off against Essential Quality and Medina Spirit, who narrowly beat him earlier in the season. Chuck and these five guys knows how sweet victory would be but, perhaps, May 1st will mark something even sweeter: people, friendships, and memories.

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