

For the Love of a Horse: A Town Remembers

By: Shanna Lee

Nestled in the Ottawa Valley is a town on a mission and they are going nationwide looking for support. Known for their maple and music festivals, their heritage streets, and Canadian equestrian icons Big Ben and Ian Millar, Perth, Ontario, is recognizing the equestrian heroes by erecting a statue in their honour.

At 17.3 hh, Belgian warmblood Big Ben, along with his partner Ian Millar, won numerous championships and countless medals. He was the first horse to win two World Cup Finals and the only horse to have won the prestigious du Maurier International twice. Big Ben represented Canada in more than 30 Nations' Cups, was a member of seven winning Nations' Cup teams, and had three Olympic appearances. Several years ago, he became the second animal to be named to the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame. "Big Ben was a great Canadian athlete, he and Ian were a great Canadian team," says Lynda Hendriks, Perth and District Chamber of Commerce president. "We want to remember them, and all they have done, not only for the sport, but for Perth." Perth is Millar's home and Big Ben's final resting place.

Terry Finnegan, past-president of the Chamber, first introduced the idea of creating a monument to remember the duo in 2001. He proposed that paying tribute to the two athletes would naturally fit the mission of the Chamber. "We want to promote economic development and prosperity for the community of Perth," he says. "This statue will recognize the incredible success of the greatest Canadian equestrian team in history. The synergy between these two concepts will enhance Perth's tourism profile. It will increase Perth's appeal as a visitor destination."

In February of 2000, the 11-member Big Ben committee was formed. It continues to meet regularly to discuss ways to gain support for the project from across the country. The project '*For the Love of a Horse*' is now a joint effort between the Perth Chamber of Commerce and the Town of Perth. They have commissioned a life-sized bronze statue of Big Ben and Millar to be placed in Perth's picturesque park along the downtown banks of the Tay River.

The sculpture, which could cost as much as \$400,000, will be a stunning life-size statue of Big Ben and Millar soaring over a five-and-a-half foot high vertical jump. Sculptor John Matthews expects the final product to be at least 10 feet high. Matthews feels that from the pictures of Ben and Millar he gets a sense of power, dynamics and energy. "It's the intensity," he says, "that I wanted to create."

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The committee has designed a logo that now adorns baseball caps, t-shirts, and saddlepads. They can be purchased from Perth tack shops Dodds and Erwin and Country Depot, the RCMP Boutique in Ottawa, through Equi-Vogue in British Columbia, and through the Chamber's web site: www.heritageperth.ca/BigBen.html. The Big Ben video, "A Glance at Greatness", can also be purchased at the same locations.

As part of the fundraising program, 500 full-colour Giclee portraits are available for sale. They are numbered and signed by both artist and Millar. Photographic artist Larry Ostrom created the portrait of Big Ben in 1998, a year before his death. Giclee printing is a process whereby photographs and original artwork are digitally refined and then outputted onto high-quality paper. Each print sells for \$500 unframed, and \$770 framed (taxes not included).

The Big Ben Committee will also be raising money by selling nine bronze miniatures of the final masterpiece. The miniature, including the base, is 31 inches long and 28 inches in height and sells for \$30,000. The first miniature, now on display in Perth, can be viewed at upcoming Perth festivals, the International Plowing Match, and the Royal Winter Fair this fall.

All proceeds from sales go towards the Big Ben project. Any money raised after the completion of the project will support therapeutic riding programs and Canada's Olympic show jumping team. Tax receipts are available from the Perth Chamber of Commerce for donations of \$10 or more. Contributors of \$300 or more will be recognized on a plaque next to the statue. To get more information to support the Big Ben project, contact the Perth and District Chamber of Commerce at (613) 267-3200 or pcoc@superaje.com.