



Another Man's Treasure

by LARRY BORTSTEIN

Just Ask Mike did nothing in his three-race career—compressed into less than two months in 1996, when he was a three-year-old—to indicate he would be a star, though his sire and damsire were leading California-breds.

The big chestnut was sired by the two-time California Horse of the Year Crystal Water who won four grade I races; the Hollywood Gold Cup and Santa Anita Handicaps and Californian and Oak Tree Invitational Stakes in 1977.

Pauline Revere, his dam, didn't finish in the money in eight career starts. But she was by Olden Times, winner of 13 stakes races, including three \$100,000 events in 1962 and 1964.

Trained by Donn Luby, Just Ask Mike never came close to graduating out of the maiden claiming ranks. On his debut, he was 10th, beaten 13 lengths, in a six-furlong event at the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club on Sept. 13, 1996.

His two other races, both during Santa Anita Park's 28th Oak Tree Racing Association meet, were equally dismal—eighth by 11 3/4 lengths at 6 1/2 furlongs on Oct. 13, and ninth by 16 lengths at a mile on Nov. 3.

If they could only see Just Ask Mike now. . .

Purchased for \$2,000 in 2002, via an advertisement for a ten-year-old "green project horse" in a horse trader magazine, by Karen Murdock who renamed him Lukas, the gelding has found his niche as an equine performer.

Now 17 years old and standing 16.1 hands and weighing 1,100 pounds, Lukas has developed into the "world's smartest horse" for his repertoire of tricks that includes nodding "yes", shaking his head "no," kissing, catching, fetching, curtsying, bowing, waving, counting to five, spelling five-letter words, recognizing colors and shapes, playing hide-and-seek and smiling.

The subject of numerous videos and articles, Lukas is being considered for a leading role in a feature-length movie, said Murdock, a Chino Hills, California, resident who has spent 37 of her 51 years around horses, competing in dressage, show jumping and barrel racing.

Lukas will also be the star of an upcoming California Thoroughbred Breeders' Association (CTBA) educational video, underwritten with funding from the Oak Tree Charitable Foundation.

If You Could See Me Now. . .

"He's learned to do all his tricks on command," said Murdock, who was a psychiatric nurse for 25 years. "He smiles by putting his upper lip above his teeth and quivering. As he's gotten a little older, he's developed some arthritis in his legs, so he can't get up from a sitting position as fast as he used to. But he can still do it. He's just a marvel."

Murdock, whose husband Doug is an electrical engineer, spends several hours each day at the Brookside Equestrian Center in Walnut, California, where she boards Lukas. She said their daughter, Angela, prefers shopping malls to horse facilities.

"Lukas' name has no connection to the trainer D. Wayne Lukas," she said. "I gave him that name because it seemed to suit him."

The horse was bred by Ed and Sharon Hudon, former California breeders in Riverside, California, whose best known runner was the multiple graded stakes-placed stakes winner Surachai.

"We had a breeding season to Crystal Water," recalled Sharon Hudon, who now owns Sierra Farm in Lexington, Kentucky. "If Crystal Water were still alive, the success of Lukas would probably make him a hot stallion."

The Hudons named the horse Just That Mike for their son-in-law Mike Talbot, to whom all family questions were directed.

"Since Lukas has become well known, we've gotten acquainted on the phone with Karen," Sharon Hudon said. "We like knowing we bred such a smart horse and her best friend."

Murdock soon will begin working with another Cal-bred who has been retired from the track. He is Cee Mister B, a nine-year-old Cee's Tizzy gelding who raced 36 times from two to eight through 2004.

"I don't know how different it will be to train a horse who's new off the track, compared to a horse like Lukas, who I started with years after his last race," she said.

"People used to tell me Thoroughbreds could only run and were too flighty to train and too dumb to learn new things, but people don't say those things to me any more. So I don't want Lukas to be known as the world's smartest horse forever. There are others out there like him." 🐾



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