

The Legacy Of Leon Richardson

BY JACKIE HALE



The Richardson family displaying their championship ribbons from the Chattanooga/Cleveland Charity horse show.

Like father, like son. Leon and Tommy competing at a horse show.



Leon and Debbie were married in January 1989, at their home in Lenoir City, TN.



The late Paul Kilgo inducting Leon Richardson into the National Racking Horse Association Hall of Fame.

I Will I Will, one of Leon's favorite five gaited horses.



The Richardson family with good friend, Mike Roberts.



Friends gathered at the ETSA Mid-Summer Classic last August for a photo with a Get Well banner for Leon, which was later signed by many people attending the show.

"It doesn't matter what you do if you're happy doing it," said Richardson. "If you give it 100%, if you really love something, just try to do it if you possibly can."

Leon Richardson lived the ASB dream for over 40 years – buying, selling, training and showing American Saddlebred horses. He shared his passion and love of the industry with his son, Tommy, and wife, Debbie. His dream was cut short on December 31, 2014 when he lost his battle with pancreatic cancer. However his dream will live on through Tommy and Debbie as they continue the legacy of Richardson Stables.

Debbie grew up in Iowa, showing her Saddlebreds on the 4-H circuit surrounded by Quarter Horses. She learned about training horses from Milt Gauger, who became her employer for 13 years following college. She met Leon following a sale at Art Simmons' in Missouri after he had purchased some horses from Gauger. Debbie was also a seamstress and made riding apparel. Leon asked her if she could make him a suit. Debbie recalls unabashedly, "I measured his body and knew I had to have it." She returned to Lenoir City, TN with him in 1988 and they were married in January of the following year.

Leon was the only son of a local Lenoir City, TN horse trader, who rode for pleasure, but never showed. Armed with natural talent, intuition and a desire to learn, Leon crawled his way up the Saddlebred ladder of success.

Tommy grew up as the apple of his father's eye. Leon stated in a Saddle Horse Report article in 1996, "I enjoy watching my son win. Every win meant a lot." Although he denied that Tommy's success was a result of his teaching ability, "I guess he just put up with me," he told SHR. Anyone who ever saw Leon ride or show a horse might beg to differ. Despite his large stature, he was a natural on a horse with a great seat and hands of gold – both characteristics his son inherited. Few people can make it look easier than Tommy Richardson.

As a team, the three Richardsons ran a tremendous operation, with as many as 60 horses in training, mostly owned privately by the stable with only a few outside training horses. Each person filled their role perfectly, with Leon on the phone and on the road, buying, selling, and hauling horses. Tommy headed up the training duties, and Debbie maintained the office as well as her own string of horses to show personally. Like a well-oiled machine, they churned out horses for sale and developed a nice string of horses to show. And show they did – traveling almost every weekend during the show season to either an ASB show or a Saddlebred Racking horse show in their area.

The list of show ring stars that passed through Richardson Stables is long and impressive. The list includes; WC Amber Lager, At The Stroke Of Midnight, Born Leader, CH Callaway's Cheltenham, Cerrudi, WC CH CF First Light Of Dawn, Champagne Powder, Cheers Cheers, WCC CH Closing Argument, CH Deliah Rose, Doubletree's Confederate Gray, WC Enzo, Eternal Revenge, Everything Will, CH Glitzy, WC Got No Shame, WC CH Green Top, WCC CH Happy Valley Treasure, CH Hear The Beat, WC Hello Moto, RWC Hillcroft Fringe Benefit, I'm Legendary (Strawberry), I Will I Will, Jolly Mon Sing, Kalahari, Lakeview's Rare A Phi, WC Lite Bright, WC Master And Commander, WC CH Mayday Malone, Meet Your Match, Miss Poise N Ivy, WC Mister Bayleigh, WC Mr Hyde, RWC New York's Real Magic, WCC CH Noel Noel, WC CH Northern Event, Precisely Right, WC CH Prophet's Fire Hazzard, Ridgefield's Supreme Commander, WC Saboteur, Scarlotti, WC Secret Cash Deposit, Shamrock's Return, WC CH Sir Winston C, WC CH Stonecroft Ring Leader, Superior Style, CH That Wonderful Man, RWC The Cunningham, WCC The Denali, WC CH The Radiant Prince, The Snap Shot, RWC Times Square TP, RWC Toranaado's Storm Warnings, and CH Vincent Van Gogh.

From youngsters that Leon picked out for Tommy to develop, to fixer-uppers, as well as nice horses that Leon bought for Debbie to campaign, he could recognize opportunities that others might pass up.

Richardson Stables filled a unique niche in the Saddlebred sales world. Because he personally owned all of the horses, Leon had the latitude to strike a deal with you. He would trade one horse for two, or a horse for a car, a boat, a piece of equipment, a horse trailer, a hot tub, or a diamond ring. There's not a horse trainer around who didn't call Leon when they needed help with a horse that wasn't working out for them. Leon would offer to buy it, or would probably have something that you could trade it in on. Now mind you, Leon didn't make many deals that he didn't come out on top, but nowhere else had the wide selection and availability that Richardson did. Leon told you everything he knew about a horse, his word and handshake were as good as any 10-page contract, and if there were ever a problem, he would make it right. As a testament to his character, Leon had many repeat buyers.

Debbie and Tommy plan to continue the same business model, however on a smaller scale. When asked how they would do it without him, Debbie replied with a laugh, "We're all going to have to work a lot harder!" They currently have about 30+ horses in training and for sale, and have good people on staff, including Justin Thomas, who is assisting with training duties. Tommy has picked up his father's job of running the roads, buying and selling horses, and both Debbie and Tommy are on the phone and back in the saddle. They plan to make their



Debbie and Leon showing off their wins at the National Racking Horse Championship.



A young Leon Richardson aboard Ridgefields' Supreme Commander. Leon was one of a handful of trainers who got along with this tough stallion.



Leon Richardson with John Champagne (L) and Tom Moore (R).



Leon and fellow Tennessean, Mike Barlow.



(SA) SJ Space Buccaneer in 2012 was Leon's final show ring appearance. He later sold this horse to Allie Wellington Nunley.



Leon exiting the ring at Alabama Charity after tailing Debbie in an in-hand class. He later said he would never do that again!

season debut this month at a local East Tennessee Saddlebred Association show and look forward to getting back into full swing this summer.

"It doesn't matter what you do if you're happy doing it," said Richardson. "If you give it 100%, if you really love something, just try to do it if you possibly can." That he did.