

The 2004 Year In Review Is Dedicated to Don Harris

“Unquestionably the greatest showman of our time,” said Chris Nalley.

A longtime customer of Hall of Fame trainer Don Harris, Nalley is part of the overwhelming majority who believe the man behind the hat can show a horse like no other. Alongside Lee Roby, Earl Teater, Garland Bradshaw, and Tom Moore, Harris continues to leave a mark on this business in such a way that it's highly improbable it can be duplicated.

His personal show record alone is enough to put him into this circle of fame: (5) Five-Gaited World's Grand Championships; (7) Five-Gaited Reserve World's Grand Championships; (6) Three-Gaited World's Grand Championships; (11) Lexington Five-Gaited Grand Championships; (12) National Horse Show Five-Gaited Championships with six different horses; (13) Rock Creek Five-Gaited Championships; and in three attempts at the American Royal, three championships with three different horses. All of this goes with countless Three-Gaited Championships from Lexington and Rock Creek.

Our honoree goes far beyond his ribbon count though. He is a great showman and a great salesman but the most important hat he has worn is that of ambassador. He has taken the Saddlebred far beyond the boundaries of the United States to countries like Haiti, South Africa and Germany. He was a regular at the Kentucky Horse Park giving demonstrations with CH Imperator and his Simpsonville, Ky., barn doors have always been open to tour groups. Harris loves to talk about the American Saddlebred and his experiences.

His experiences have been many. He grew up the son of an Elbersfeld, Ind., coal miner who always had mules and horses around. The younger Harris was smitten at an early age. From a Shetland pony he graduated to a roan gaited pony. It wasn't



Don and World's Grand Champion CH Imperator.

like the gaited ponies we know today, however, it could rack up a storm, according to Harris. His father would tell the announcer before the local shows that when his son won the pleasure pony class to announce he was riding a racking pony. The announcer would ask the lad to show off his racking pony and that he did.

“I couldn't make just one victory pass. I'd make two or three,” chuckled Harris.

Even at an early age the show ring was a stage and Harris was ever the actor. Joe Harris fully supported his son's equine endeavors, driving him to shows all over Indiana and Illinois. They eventually met up with Saddlebred dealer L.S. Dickey in French Lick, Ind. Harris became a regular visitor to the stable watching such great horsemen as Marty Mueller, Bill Hill, and Elvis Wilson work their magic.

As much as Harris was taken by the American Saddlebred, he had another love as a youth, basketball. He led his high school team in scoring all four years and then turned down a full scholarship to Purdue University to pursue his training career. The Harris barn at home went from six stalls to 18 and the young man hung out his sign and began taking outside horses.

“I taught riding lessons, took in problem horses, anything I could to make it work,”

said Harris. “When I started out there were still a lot of private jobs. The whole idea of a public training barn was just taking hold. I wanted to be my own man and stay on my own and that's something I've been very proud of. I've never been on someone's payroll. I've always worked for myself.”

One of Harris' first name horses was a black walk-trot mare he got from Art Simmons after trading in a horse he had originally purchased from Simmons and getting the mare in return. He won the Open Three-Gaited class at Shelbyville and sold the mare to Helen Crabtree following the class. Crabtree showed her back and won the championship. The mare's name was Lady Anacacho but Crabtree changed it to The Sorceress. She went on to be the dam of Glenview's Warlock and Status Symbol.

As Harris was developing his business he also developed a relationship with a pretty young lady who had been taking lessons with him. She followed him around to horse shows as Harris rarely allowed himself time to have a date. The future Roz Harris knew early on she would be in a supporting role for as much as he cared about her, the horses were his life. Throughout their life together Roz was the inspiration and support he needed to give his all to training. They conducted themselves with dignity in both their professional and private lives while raising two sons, Jeff and Stan, and a daughter Angela.

The Harrises took great pride in watching daughter Angela show as a junior exhibitor and son Stan has long been a part of his father's operation working side by side over the past several years.

Early in his career Harris was invited to move to Rockport, Ind., as a group of Owensboro, Ky., businessmen put a group together and built a barn for him to start a public training facility. One of his first top

horses was a Wing Commander gaited mare named Really Mine and a walk-trot gelding out of Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion Daydream named Belmar King. In Harris' first trip to the World's Championship Horse Show (1963) he rode Belmar King to a reserve world's championship in the junior three-gaited division.

Two years later Harris and Belmar King were reserve in the under two stake behind Earl Teater and Local Talent. He also rode Commander's Fair Lady to the Three-Year-Old Five-Gaited Reserve World's Championship and directed Cris Connor and Johnny Reb to the Three-Gaited Pony 12 & Under World's Championship. Nine-year-old Debbie Hagerman and Starheart's Black Magic were also a part of his string that year.

"Oh boy, that was a big deal for me," said Harris. "To go in there and do that, I knew I was on the right track."

Fours years after his Louisville debut, Harris won his first world's championship with the three-year-old walk-trot mare named Wild and Lovely. She was the first of many impressive three-year-old three-gaited stars for Harris throughout his career including Impressive's First Lady, Vanity's Rooster, and New Estate.

Harris has had many outstanding horses to his credit but the first of his greats was Giddy-Up-Go. Still hailed as the greatest horse to never wear the roses, Giddy-Up-Go and Harris beat every horse they ever showed against except My My and that included Yorktown, Will Shriver and Surefire. He was reserve a few times, but never quite got over the hump.

"That's one of the biggest regrets in my life, that horse's name not being on the wall in Freedom Hall."

Most horsemen would be so lucky as to have one horse like Giddy-Up-Go in their career; Harris has had a procession of great ones. The greatest of them all was the world renowned CH Imperator. Slow to develop, Imperator thrived under Harris' patience. They won the junior stake at Louisville and then got stronger and stronger showing the world a slow gait unlike any other. It became trademark Harris, one-handed passes down the middle, saw dust flying several feet behind. Imperator became the "people's horse" much like Giddy-Up-Go had been.

Then they ran into Sky Watch. Of all the



Sultan's Starina was yet another Three-Gaited World's Grand Champion for Harris.

great show downs in the history of the American Saddlebred, Imperator versus Sky Watch has been the greatest of them all.

"That gelding [Imperator] is the reason Sky Watch was as good as he was. Imperator raised the bar," said Sky Watch's trainer Mitch Clark in an earlier interview. "We had to raise to that level. Imperator would have never been beaten if it weren't for Sky Watch.

"All of the classes in which we met were so much fun because of the manner in which we conducted ourselves," continued Clark. "Don and I had some great battles but always with sportsmanship. We would work the crowds and we would get close to one another, but never close enough to affect the other's horse."

Imperator was a four times Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion with Harris and both Imperator's slow gait and Harris' turned down fedora hat became icons of the show ring. They won the stake at Lexington five times.

Harris also won the Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship with Protege, a horse with whom he had won the Junior World's Grand Championship the year before.

Harris was set to win yet another Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship with the popular stallion known as Prize Contender, however, the night of the stallion stake Roz died of a heart attack in the box at Freedom Hall. Shortly after that shocking set back it was discovered Harris needed bypass surgery.

A few years later another special lady

would come into Harris' life. Judy Whitney, widow of legendary trainer Bob Whitney, married Harris. The two have since formed an incredible bond, supporting one another in their respective endeavors.

Our 2004 honoree has worked long and hard and withstood great personal tragedy to stay on top of his game decade after decade. This past year was a special one coming back after a few lean years personally and professionally to win the Junior Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship with the Nalley family's It's All About Me; the ASHA National Three-Year-Old Five-Gaited Futurity World's Championship and UPHA Classic Grand Championship with Sandra Corney's Heirison Ford; and the Kentucky County Fair Five-Gaited Championship with Karla Kucera's Lucrative. The master was still giving riding lessons to the youngsters.

"It's special to watch Don develop a young gaited horse," said Chris Nalley. "No one does it better. I feel fortunate to have been a part of a few of them."

The names of Harris-trained stars would fill chapters but in addition to the above mentioned standouts there have been Three-Gaited World's Grand Champions CH Finisterre's Gift Of Love and CH Sultan's Starina as well as world's champions Glory Road, Half Angel, You Are Love, The Executor, Rare Decision, Apple Cider, Dr. Something Special, Sparkling Delight Again, Magic Marvel, Tucker Hill's Silver Shadow, Missy's Flying Genius, Northern Event, Bell Hop, Eternal Fire, Starheart's Love, Gaily Gaily, Guy's Gal, Enlightening, Winged Fox, Melody's Wing Sensation, Lady's Favorite Event, Lady Magic, Lady Supreme, Classic Vintage, Hollywood Smile, Sultan's Supremacy, Monti Scott, Fanciful Spirit, La La Success, Reedann's Box Seat, King's Tradition, The Rose, Freedom Song, Lifetime Memories, Roz, Party Train, Shoobop Shoobop, Super Jewel, Arista, Evening Dazzle, American Royal GSM, Fortune's Fanfare, Callaway's Rockaway, Nightly Affair, The Groomsman, Bellamie, Super Serenade, AbuerGINE, Surrender To Fantasy, Mayme Phelps, SS Lies and Alibis, Sue Elegant, Our Canary Diamond, Callaway's Career Girl, and Lady Periana. Harris is also the breeder of multi-titled World's Grand Champion CH Hollywood Excellence. □