

SADDLEBRED WORLD LOSES A LEGEND

by Ann Bullard

The four-times Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion, CH Emperor, was humanely put to death Oct. 20, 1997, the sixth day after colic surgery. He was 23 years old.

"I was with him during the surgery," Don Harris, who trained and rode the gelding to all four of his world's grand championships, said. "John Nicholson, the Horse Park's new director, and the caretakers were with him throughout the surgery as well."

"We were kind of encouraged, after five days we thought he was getting out of the woods," Harris said.

Harris saw him last on the day before his death. "He was on his feet, with his ears up. He was standing there, shaking, and still had his ears up. It showed how game he was," Harris said.

CH Emperor won his first world's championship as a junior horse. "That's when he found himself," Harris said. "From that time on, he really put it together, and we knew we had a super horse."

Emperor was shown 85 times at 44 shows, winning 68 blue ribbons. He won the world's grand championship in 1980, '81, '85 and, at age 12, in 1986. He was undefeated in eight five-gaited gelding classes at the World's Championship Horse Show and won five reserve world's grand championships in addition to his four grand championship titles. Emperor was undefeated at Lexington with Harris, won every time he showed at the National Horse Show in New York and in his only American Royal appearance.

Most of the gelding's major show ring triumphs were under the ownership of Judge Curtis Meanor and Dr. Geraldine Meanor's Finisterre Farm,



Photo by Jamie Donaldson

CH Emperor with Don Harris in his last appearance at Freedom Hall, his retirement in August, 1991.

Glen Ridge, N.J. Except for a brief period when he was owned by William Dutel, New Orleans, La., and Ron and Paula Kirsh, Los Angeles, Calif., he was owned by the Meanors and under Harris' direction.

"He was barely two when we picked him out of a muddy field in Illinois," Dr. Meanor remembered. "Lillard Cox was our trainer at home. He'd trained Empress Wing, Emperor's dam, and told us if she ever had a foal, we'd better go look at it because she was a great one. We learned she'd had a foal by a very great sire, Supreme Sultan. We went to Peacock Farms on

a very cold, bad day.

"He was gangly, long-legged, dirty, and scrawny, but he trotted right up to us with his ears up. It looked like he had a fairly good trot," she continued. "They thought he was the worst one on the premises, that we were the biggest fools in the world."

"It was a long trip home, so we asked Lou Teater to put Emperor up for the night. He told us the colt was the funniest looking one he'd seen in a long time. He asked, 'are you sure you bought the right one?'"

The Meanors brought the colt home and Lillard Cox gaited him.

"He told us this was going to be a good one," Dr. Meanor said. "He was the only horse we had that never went backwards. He remembered everything we taught him."

The Meanors also had horses with Don Harris at the time, and when Emperor was three, he was sent to Harris. "I told Don we had a three-year-old we were going to send him. You won't like him until you start to work him, I told Don." He looked and said 'I don't know'. Six weeks later he called back and said 'you bet!'"

Emperor didn't win at Louisville as a three-year-old but in 1978 he was crowned Junior World's Champion. It was the first of many. His outstanding, 'old-fashioned' slow gait and 12 foot tail were two of the characteristics for which he is remembered.

Emperor was a crowd favorite. Perry! Perry! echoed through Freedom

Hall as he gave his all every time he showed. His fans probably started the promotion craze with their 'Perry Me' campaign at one World's Championship Horse Show.

Next to Harris, Mitch Clark may have had the best appreciation of Emperor. It was Clark and Michele Macfarlane's Skywatch who went heart to heart with Perry in what may be the most memorable five-gaited grand championships at Louisville of all times.

"I was a huge fan," Clark said. "I respect him for what he was. Because of his caliber, I was forced, pressed to my best level.

"I don't know if we will ever again in our lifetime see two horses that can show at that level," he continued. "I'm not privileged to see that often enough. To have them ready to show, to have a dual that's an actual dual,

and only meet once a year - that is why we do what we do.

"I never heard anyone knock that horse," Clark said. "That's quite a feat in itself. I never heard it - ever. I don't know if there's a higher compliment with the diverse group of people we have in this business.

"He represents some magic that happened to me in my life. It's sad to hear some of the magic is leaving."

Emperor made his final show at Louisville in 1988, and was turned out at the Kentucky Horse Park. He was brought back to Louisville for his official retirement in August, 1991, at the 100th anniversary show.

"I may be prejudiced, but he was one of a kind," Harris said. "No doubt about it. He was a show horse at every step."

Emperor spent the last years of his life at the Kentucky Horse Park, where he was turned out and led out for visitors three times a day.

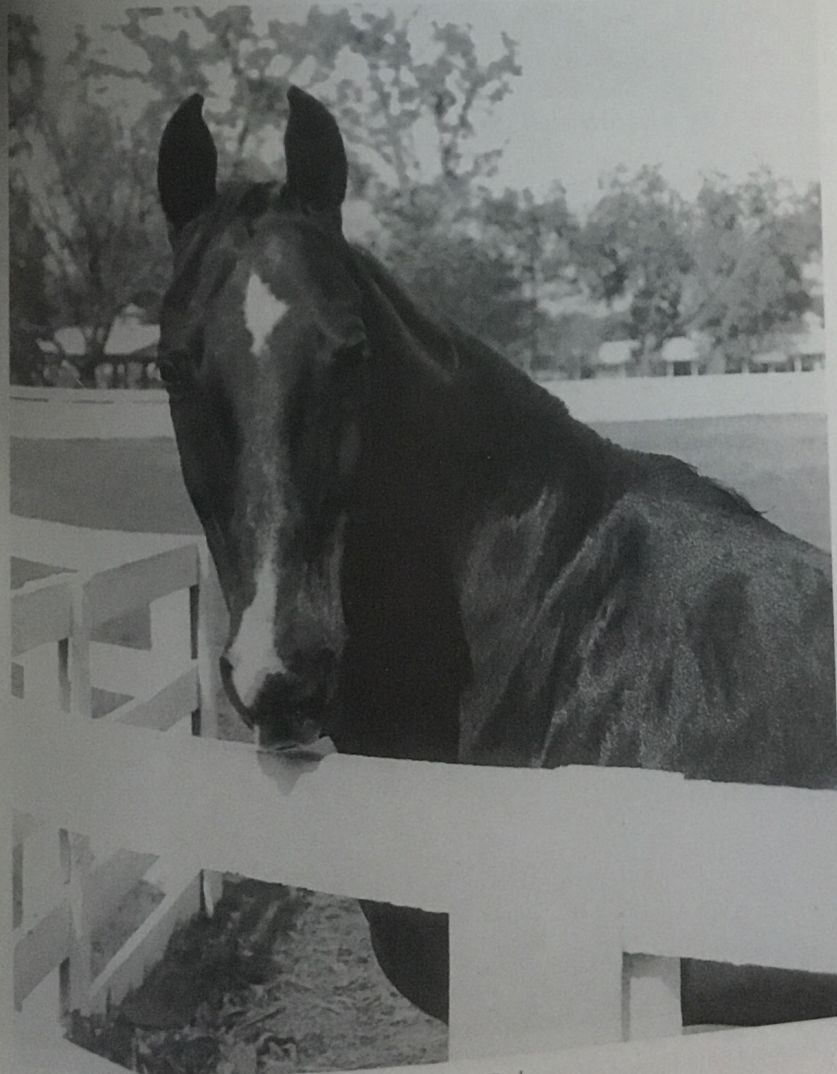
Even when he was turned out, Perry remained a show horse. Meanor told of one incident at the Horse Park. During a show, a trainer was working his horse next to Emperor's paddock. Perry came up to the fence and racked along with him. The trainer said, Perry, will you stop making me look bad, you're doing it without a rider! Thanks a lot. I'm going to find another place to train my horse," Dr. Meanor recounted.

"During the Kentucky Fall Classic (held at the Horse Park October, 1997), I happened to walk up at the right time and was asked to lead him in, show and tell about him," Harris remembered. "You've never heard so many questions. I'm glad I got to spend that time with him."

Emperor is buried on a hill behind the Hall of Champions pavilion next to Rambling Willie and Forego, both stablemates at the Hall of Champions, near the paddocks where he spent his last days.

"He was my greatest love," Dr. Meanor mused. "People say to me, 'I think I have another Emperor. I think the greatest compliment to my horse is to use him as a mark of excellence.

"He's the horse everybody loved," Dr. Meanor said. "That's one of the things that's going on his tombstone." □



A life of leisure as an ambassador at the Kentucky Horse Park.