

CH Sky Watch

A Legend In His Own Time

B Y B O B F U N K H O U S E R

"I was doing the television feed that year," said horse show announcer Bill Carrington, "and the producer told me we were going to try something new. That class got going and we had both horses up on a split screen for the first time ever and I just started hollering. Mitch went after Emperor and the people went absolutely crazy. Jim Koller was one of the judges and he told me afterwards that standing there up close to Sky Watch he thought the stud was going to throw a shoulder out of socket."

Sky Watch was crowned the Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion over Emperor. Both horses received thunderous standing ovations that haven't been duplicated since. In fact, when Clark and Sky Watch made their victory pass people blocked the gate and pushed them back into the ring for one more trip. At that point there was enough electricity in Freedom Hall to light the city of Louisville.

"I didn't know if that was in good taste, but I didn't have much choice," recalled Clark. "They pushed me back into the ring and I had to go again. I didn't want to be disrespectful, but I think those people just didn't want it to end."

"During the class I couldn't hear anything, I had to tune all of that out. I was aware of the people and the support we were getting, but I had to stay totally focused on the job at hand, because one slip and they [the crowd] would have just as easily gone with that gelding [Emperor]. That gelding is the reason that Sky Watch was as good as he was. Emperor had raised the bar. We had to rise to that level, he had given us something to work towards. That gelding would have never been beaten if it weren't for Sky Watch."

As great as those two horses were, their riders were equally as talented. They milked the crowd for every ounce. They made it exciting to be a spectator and to be in the Saddle Horse business.

The battle would continue and according to Clark both horses came back even better the next year. Besides his unique trot, Sky Watch developed a powerful, ground covering rack as well as a pretty darn good slow-gait of his own. Sky Watch did win again in '83, and in '84 his closest competitor was Our Golden Duchess as Emperor went to the amateur ranks with Billy Dutel.

"All of the classes in which we met were so much fun because of the manner in which we conducted ourselves," said 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 each other's horse."

"It brought out the best in all of us," said Harris. "The horses, Mitch, myself, we were all better when competing head to head. His horse had the greatest trot there's ever been. Mine had the greatest slow gait. We both played the crowd, it was showmanship at its best. When they would call for a walk after racking that darn Mitch would drop that stud down into a trot and

"The word 'great' is so misused today, but he was truly a great horse. He gave you everything he had, whenever you wanted it. I guess the thing that really separated him from the others was you could catch and pass anybody whenever you wanted to. I have never been on a horse that you could single out, catch and then pass any other horse in the ring at any given time."

-Mitchell Clark

make another pass or two before cantering. We've never seen a horse trot like that before. Of course I would squeeze an extra slow-gait in here and there.

"They were two different horses. It was kind of a shame that they both came along at the same time because I don't believe my horse would have ever been beaten. But for the industry I think it's the greatest thing that has ever happened. I know Mitch is going to miss his horse as much as I miss mine."

The titans met again in 1985. Sky Watch won his fourth Five-Gaited Stallion World's Championship and Emperor won his sixth Five-Gaited Gelding World's Championship. On that championship night it was apparent that Sky Watch was not Sky Watch. A hush fell over Freedom Hall as Clark slowly went to the center of the ring and asked permission to be excused. Emperor went on to win his third World's Grand Championship.

It was time for a little rest from the show ring and stallion service began. He stood under the direction of Macfarlane's long-time friend Bob Robinson in Kentucky. After some time off Sky Watch went back to

California and was put back to work. In 1987 he returned to the show ring on the West Coast winning at CARES, Del Mar, Santa Barbara and the Cow Palace.

San Francisco's Cow Palace was the place where Macfarlane and Sky Watch made a statement that they were again ready to take on the best. Flying around the famed indoor oval, Sky Watch and Macfarlane had the cowboys screaming their approval and announcer Mike Moran was yelling over the loud speaker. It was electricity that only Sky Watch could create.

It had been three years since Sky Watch walked from center ring of Freedom Hall, withdrawing from the championship event. He was back, however, and so was his famed rival. Harris and Emperor had won their fourth World's Grand Championship in '86, and in '87 he was again teamed with another amateur. In 1988, Macfarlane and Sky Watch started the week sailing through the stallion stake. Harris did the same in the gelding class. Saturday's rematch had legions of fans for both horses lined up to witness history in the making.

Calm, cool, and collected Macfarlane piloted the great stallion like she was riding through the park. They would come out of a turn and then just step on the gas, passing everyone in their way.

CH Sky Watch, CH Emperor, CH Callaway's Mr. Republican, and CH The Phoenix were left in the middle of the ring as the remainder of the class worked a second time for what appeared to be fifth through eighth. When that section lined up, the above four went back to the rail with Sky Watch getting bigger with every pass. Michele Macfarlane became the first woman to win the Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship and remains the only amateur woman to ever do so.

There was one last trip for Sky Watch. That year Macfarlane and Sky Watch thrilled Madison Square Garden with two explosive performances. It would be his final two.

He was just such a brilliant animal," said Macfarlane. "He was so smart and such a show horse. At home I would just exercise him, he was just a horse. He knew the difference when we went to the horse show. He was a thrill to ride."

That thrill is what owners and trainers alike spend a lifetime looking for. Sky Watch has been described as having a headset like a chess piece and motion that defied description. For most people it was the sheer power that overwhelmed you, yet it was a controlled power. We've seen many horses that were explosive but appeared to be a half a step from out of control. Sky Watch would be passing horses at the rack like they were standing still and then come back to a walk and stop out in the middle of the ring. With one step he cantered better than any equitation horse and there wasn't a rail within 20 yards.

"The canter was the only time he had to catch his breath," explained Clark. "Cantering from the center of the ring was about being broke and prepared. I figured there was much less chance of getting into any kind of trouble out there than there was on the rail with people hanging over it and beating on it. I thought, 'why take a chance of getting into traffic and make a mistake that could cost you.'"

He's number one in my book," said Pat McConnell. "I've been going to Louisville since My My and he [Sky Watch] was the greatest. And Sky Watch and Emperor together was the greatest thing that has happened in this business."

Sky Watch will forever have legions of fan. He created a fervor that made people want to be a part of



This picture of Sky Watch portrays all the attributes that made him the greatest Saddlebred ever. He was ridden to three Five-Gaited World's Grand Championships by Mitchell Clark.

the Saddle Horse business.

"I guess that's one of the greatest things that I took from my time with Sky Watch," said Clark. "I will never forget going down what is now Stopher Walk after winning that first year and seeing the joy and enthusiasm on the face of every one who walked by. Trainers told me they went home and worked harder than ever because of seeing Sky Watch. Owners told me they went out and bought new horses because they were so excited. It was pretty amazing."

"I've seen them all since my Dad showed Plainview's Julia against Daydream and when he [Sky Watch] was on, he's the best I ever saw. It's that simple," said Jimmy Robertson. He was a stud and took a lot of work, but he was bigger and bolder and so correct. He was the best five-gaited horse there has ever been."

When pouring over the many wonderful things about Sky Watch it was hard for Clark to come up with just what made him such a unique horse.

"The word 'great' is so misused today, but he was truly a great horse," said Clark. "He gave you everything he had, whenever you wanted it. I guess the thing that really separated him from the others was you could catch and pass anybody whenever you wanted to. It felt awesome. I have never been on a horse that you could single out, catch, and then pass any other horse in the ring at any given time. I just can't tell you how much power I had under me."

"His willingness to step forward is what made him so rare. He was so go forward you had to really think to stay ahead of him. That horse made me a thinking horse trainer. I never showed him back in the same

curb bit as we qualified in. Shoot, he would have that thing figured out and would be harder to keep together, so I had to switch.

"As great as that was, it has kind of made it hard when riding or trying out other horses. I've been fortunate enough to have several other really nice horses, but none of them live up to the feeling of riding that stud. Sky Watch was the first thing Michele [Macfarlane] and I did together and since then, we have tried several other horses and she would say, 'what do you think?' They only way I could respond was, 'Oh, this is nice, but it's not what we had.'"

The show ring is where Sky Watch became a household name and an ambassador for the breed. Whether it was sending the hunter/jumper crowd into orbit at Devon, or having the cowboys waving their hats and hootin' and hollerin' at the Cow Palace, or sifting through the green shavings of Freedom Hall unlike any of the past legends of the breed, Sky Watch brought great recognition and excitement to the American Saddlebred industry. He would carry that same pride into retirement.

When Macfarlane first started her Winterfest Show at the Scripps Miramar ranch in San Diego, Sky Watch would be turned out in his paddock next to the barn so legions of fans could visit him. Not only was he a super star, he had the personality of "the horse next door" when the time called for it. He posed for picture after picture and loved the attention he received. With that same attitude he later became a hit at the Kentucky Horse Park Hall of Champions. This mighty stallion with ability beyond description was but a pet in the hands of a child.

Besides the wonderful memories of his show ring greatness, Sky Watch has also left us with a long list of champion offspring. As Clark described above, nothing quite compares with Sky Watch himself, but nonetheless he produced some talented world's champions. This past year Macfarlane debuted Catamaran (CH Sky Watch x CH Caravelle) to win the Two-Year-Old Five-Gaited World's Championship. He was just recently purchased by Laurel Nelson and put in training with Clark.

"I won't say he will be as good, but at this stage he reminds you of his dad, especially his personality," said Clark. He's awful good at this stage, the most potential I've had since his dad."

Besides Catamaran the list of world's and reserve world's champions includes Pagan Prince, Castle Bravo, Elegant Sky, Promises, CH The Billy Bob, CH Amberwood's Sky Fox, Skyborn, Special Export Light, The Wildflower, Soda Pop Curtis, Prediction, DeNiro, Sky Caper, and national champions Swatch Watch, CH Harvest Commander, Kiss The Sky, I'm A Girlwatcher, Amberwood's Skylark, Wind Poppies, Be My Skywatch, Classic Signature, and Cielo Yellow.

And so now we say goodbye to a friend. I feel privileged to have witnessed most all of your sensational performances and to have a rose from your first World's Grand Championship. And I know that I speak for many when I say your life here had a profound impact on the American Saddlebred. No matter what our role in this industry, we all hope to do it as well as you did. Enjoy your days with "Perry" and thank you for leaving us with visions of true greatness. ▲



Owner Michele Macfarlane became the first woman and today is still the only amateur woman to win the Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship, his fourth.

When I first heard the news, I felt the sadness of losing a close friend. I also knew that I was not alone in that feeling. The second reaction was, "he couldn't have been 24."

Foaled June 14, 1977, at the Earl Teater and Sons Farm on Tates Creek Pike in Lexington, Ky., the legendary CH Sky Watch was laid to rest Sunday, April 22, 2001, at the Kentucky Horse Park alongside other equine legends such as his arch-rival CH Imperator, the Thoroughbreds Forego and Bold Forbes, and the Standardbred Rambling Willie. He was humanely put down due to complications from neurological problems resulting from an injury sustained at the park.

"CH Sky Watch's unique combination of power and beauty made him a favorite of visitors to the Kentucky Horse Park," said John Nicholson, Executive Director for the Kentucky Horse Park. "It was a particular honor to have this legendary horse here representing the best of Kentucky's native breed, and we feel a deep loss at his passing."

While there were many affectionate comments about how Sky Watch was a favorite of those at the Horse Park since his arrival in 1998 to replace CH Imperator who had passed away in '97, Sky Watch was even closer to the hearts of the people in the Saddlebred industry who had never laid a hand on the magnificent red stallion, but were privileged enough to have witnessed one or many of his unbelievable performances. For he was and is the standard against which all others are judged.

"I strongly believe he was the best Saddle Horse to ever live," said his long-time trainer Mitchell Clark. "I saw My My; my grandfather [Garland Bradshaw] had Lady Carrigan; I've seen film of Wing Command-

er; all of them were great horses, but I don't think any of them could have handled Sky Watch back out on the rail. He had incredible strength on the second workout and he would give you more for as long as you asked for it."

"Of the horses that have won so far, he was the best," said Jim Koller, trainer of 1994 Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion Onion. "He could execute all five gaits to perfection. Many of the top horses were superior at one gait, but he could do them all."

Clark's relationship with Sky Watch began when his breeder, Mrs. Judson Large, sent the yearling stallion son of Flight Time out of the Genius Bourbon King daughter, Aries Golden Gift, to Clark for training.

"He wasn't exceptional, but he was a handful," said Clark. "She [Mrs. Large] wanted him as a harness horse but he dictated he wasn't going to do that. He broke more harness and tore up every cart I had in the barn. He also didn't have much motion. If he had shown signs of what he was going to be at that stage, I probably would never have gotten him. I was only in my twenties. I think he would have gone to another established trainer. My grandfather was still around working a couple so I guess they figured he would keep an eye on me and not let me get in trouble."

"I started riding him out of self-defense," continued Clark. "He was becoming increasingly tough and when I started gaiting him, it was at least six weeks before he took any steps that resembled a rack. The turning point came when I started working him twice a day. I had to learn not to fight him, but wear him down. He was a stallion with a very strong will."

"Once he learned to rack he became a different horse. Through slow-gaiting I put a mouth on him

and his motion developed. It changed his timing and allowed him to do things that he couldn't do before. It was then that he started feeling like a different kind of a horse. I had won the Two-Year-Old Five-Gaited Stake at Louisville just before I got him so I knew what that felt like, but this had an even different feel to it."

Sky Watch and Clark did win the Two-Year-Old Five-Gaited World's Championship in 1979, the first of 12 world's champion titles the stallion would win before his career came to a close. Shortly after his two-year-old world's championship, Sky Watch was purchased by Michele Macfarlane who took him to California for most of his three-year-old year before reuniting with Clark at the end of the season to win the Three-Year-Old Five-Gaited Class at Stone Mountain.

In '81 Sky Watch and Clark won the Junior Five-Gaited Stallion/Gelding World's Championship and the Junior Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship, setting up a rivalry the following year that in the eyes of many was the greatest thing that ever happened to the Saddle Horse business.

Ali vs. Frazier. Lakers vs. Celtics. And now the Saddle Horse business had Sky Watch vs. Imperator. The story of Sky Watch can not be told without including the greatest show ring rivalry in the history of the breed.

"A lot of people had forgotten he [Sky Watch] was a two-year-old world's champion and then he won the junior stake as a four-year-old," explained Imperator's trainer, Don Harris. "That year he won the junior stake I went to Kansas City and saw him and came back home and told the Meanors [Imperator's owners] that we were going to be up against some tough competition the next few years. They didn't want to believe that. No disrespect to the horses we had been showing against, but we had had it pretty easy up to that point. I told them we were about to have a battle on our hands."

It turned out to be an event unlike any Freedom Hall had ever witnessed. Having grown up in Kentucky and gone to high school and college in the state, I had been to several concerts and ball games in Freedom Hall in addition to the World's Championship Horse Show since 1971, but never was the noise level what it was for that Saturday night in August of 1982. The titans did meet!

Monday night Clark and Sky Watch rocked the house winning the stallion stake, while two nights later, the Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion of 1980 and '81 captured yet another gelding stake.

I can remember Stake Night '82 like it was yesterday. From Wednesday night till Saturday, that's all that was talked about. "Could the young stallion knock off the horse of the people, Imperator?" Many claims were made, many bets were taken.

This was one class that went beyond the wildest imaginations. Sky Watch hit the ring at a trot that was nothing short of explosive. With every pass the stud got bigger. That was his gate and Clark played it to the hilt. When it came time to slow-gait the momentum shifted back to Harris and Imperator.

That was the gelding's trademark and Harris too played the crowd. Back and forth it went, people screaming to the tops of their lungs and stomping their feet with approval. There would have been a riot if there hadn't been a two-horse workout and that's where the stud just wore down the gelding. With bursts of power that most in attendance had never witnessed, it was a game of cat and mouse.