

FEATURE HERO SURPRISE VICTOR IN BREED'S RICHEST RACE EVER

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TRACK Magazine Contributing Editor

RUIDOSO DOWNS—A Quarter Horse owner cannot aim any higher than the McKinney family's Reliance Ranches did this year with Feature Hero.

Since last summer, the owners of notable three-year-old Quarter Horses of 2013 have known that Ruidoso Downs was offering an all-time record purse for a Quarter Horse race, that being the All American Derby G1 that was scheduled to run on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend.

The purse turned out to be \$2,809,784 . . . the biggest prize ever offered for American Quarter Horses.

The McKinneys, with trainer Eddie Willis, were no different. They aimed Feature Hero to the 440-yard race. When Feature Hero ran the race of his life to secure the first-place purse of \$1,180,110, he gave Reliance Ranches their biggest win as an owner.

Ridden by Jimmy Brooks, Feature Hero ran 440 yards in a hand-timed 21.56 seconds to win the All American Derby by a neck over fastest qualifier Bon Accord.

The result was a milestone victory for Reliance Ranches — Gary McKinney and his son and daughter-in-law Micah and Leslie McKinney. Considering their recent investment in the sport, there are likely to be more major wins.

Micah and Leslie McKinney live on the family's ranch in Llano, Texas, and have a hands-on approach to racing.

"Our main goal was to win the All American," Micah McKinney said. "We set out for the Futurity, but with the Derby being the highest purse and what it's gotten to today, it's awesome. It gives us inspiration to continue to do well."

Reliance Ranches was at the forefront of Quarter Horse racing throughout Labor Day weekend in New Mexico.

During the Ruidoso Select Yearling

Sale on held Friday through Sunday, Reliance Ranches bought 12 yearlings for more than \$1.1 million while also selling several nice yearlings. In the middle of all that action, they scored the upset win with Feature Hero Sunday afternoon just prior to the last session of the sale.

A gelding by Valiant Hero, Feature Hero was bought for \$40,000 at the 2011 Ruidoso Select Yearling Sale.

Like many of the 10 runners in the All American Derby, Feature Hero was considered a supporting player to Wicked Courage, who had won the \$823,000 Ruidoso Derby G1 in June and \$1,055,000 Rainbow Derby G1 in July.

But Wicked Courage was second to fastest qualifier Bon Accord after stumbling at the start of a 440-yard time trial on August 17, leading to questions about whether the five-time stakes winner was vulnerable in the All American Derby final.



TRACK Magazine photo/Christine Hudson

Reliance family celebrates the big win.

Feature Hero, the tenth-fastest qualifier who made the final by only .002 of a second, was a 23-1 outsider. He had only one win in his first five starts of 2013, a trial for the Remington Park Oklahoma-Bred Derby in April. He followed that victory with a second in the \$253,000 final.

In the All American Derby trials, Feature Hero was second by a neck to Louisiana Corona. The loss led to

slightly tempered expectations for the All American Derby.

"I really believed he would be in the top three, probably more second or third," Micah McKinney said. "I knew he'd get out and make them catch him and he did just that."

Willis told Micah McKinney after the trials that he expected a top four finish.

"He's real sound. A sound horse comes back to run well for the most part," Willis said. "He was just getting better. He gained weight between the trials and finals. When they do that they usually run a big race. I was expecting him to run really good, probably not that good."

Feature Hero broke from post 7. With earnings of \$126,528, he had the second-highest career earnings of any horse in the field behind Wicked Courage, at \$1,041,350. The field also included Vancouver Moon, second in the 2012 Rainbow Futurity G1; Tayte Me Down, fourth in the Ruidoso Derby G1 in June; and Point Break Dash, who was fourth in the Rainbow Derby G1 in July.

There were several notable absences from the final, which was run before 21,857, the largest crowd for a day of racing at Ruidoso Downs other than Labor Day.

PJ Chick In Black, the Champion Two-Year-Old Filly of 2012; Matabari, the winner of the Los Alamitos Two Million Futurity G1 last December; Brace for Bernal, who won the Heritage Place Derby G2 at Remington Park in June; Aha Moment, third in the 2012 All

American Futurity; and Lota PYC, who won the Remington Park Oklahoma-Bred Futurity in 2012, all ran in the time trials but failed to qualify.

In the final, Wicked Courage was the 4-5 favorite, but it was apparent an upset was in the making a few strides after the gate opened. Wicked Courage was away without incident, but showed none of his typical acceleration and was sixth after 100 yards, eventually losing his running path.

Bon Accord, breaking from the rail, held an early lead, closely followed by Elisas Secret and Vancouver Moon. Feature Hero broke well, but trailed by about a length after 100 yards. Brooks had the gelding in full stride by the halfway point, taking a narrow lead over Bon Accord.

There was little between Feature Hero and Bon Accord through the final 100 yards.

Brooks worried that his rivals would get by Feature Hero in the final strides.

"I thought they might be catching me, but they kind of ran up on me, so I got into him a few more times left-handed and he just kinda exploded away from them," Brooks said.

The finish was desperate, Brooks said. "They were coming at me – but not very fast," he said.

Willis ponied Feature Hero to the gate, and therefore he had a limited view of the race. What he saw as Feature Hero ran away from the gate left him encouraged.

"I told some of the pony girls my horse left to win," he said. "I've been having a little trouble with the horse finishing the race. He really finished well."

Bon Accord held second, finishing three-quarters of a length in front of Point Break Dash.

Bon Accord, a gelding by Shazoom, races for breeders J. Garvan Kelly and Nancy Yearsley, who share ownership with Vinewood Farms. The All American Derby was the first stakes final for Bon Accord, who earned \$505,761 for the brave runner-up finish.

Bon Accord's dam is the \$6,000 earning Royal Quick Dash mare Dream Mirage, and this gelding is a half-brother to Ed Burke Million Futurity G1 finalist Pipers Tune \$77,000. The second dam is an \$81,000 earning Thoroughbred daughter of Gulch. This is the female family of Dublin \$438,000 and Mike's Classic \$328,000.

Point Break Dash, a colt by First Down Dash, races for Jon and Donna McPherson and was bred by their Grant Farms in Louisiana. Point Break Dash won a division of the All American Derby trials, and was beaten a length by Feature Hero in the final. The two big derbies are the only stakes finals in Point Break Dash's 10-race career.

Point Break Dash is a half-brother to 2010 All American Futurity winner Mr

Piloto \$1,002,000. The dam is \$74,000 earning daughter of Splash Bac. This is the family of JLS Party Wagon \$148,000, JLS Streak Of Snow \$131,000 and Champions Josie's Bar, Go Josie Go and Galobar (winner of the first All American Futurity in 1959).

Vancouver Moon finished fourth, followed by 5th—Wonderboy; 6thm—Elisas Secret; 7th—Wicked Courage; 8th—Louisiana Corona; 9th—Tayte Me Down and 10th—The Magic Dash. The Magic Dash showed poor action shortly after the start and tailed off quickly. He was vanned off the racetrack.

Wicked Courage was never a factor. He was not obstructed at the start and was quickly more than a length behind the leaders.

"He just never fired," jockey Cody Jensen said. "He didn't know how to race between horses because he had never had to do it before."

Watching Feature Hero, Micah McKinney was left anxious in the final strides of the race.

FEATURE HERO (#7), 2010 g.
All American Derby G1 • \$2,809,784
9/1/13 RUI • 440 in :21.560 (SI-87)
Earning \$1,180,110
Lifetime: 4-3-3 in 14, earning \$1,306,638
O—Reliance Ranches LLC. B—Lana Merrick and Kent Jackson. T—Eddie Willis. J—Jimmy Brooks.
2nd by neck Bon Accord; 3rd by nearly 1 Point Break Dash.

VALIANT HERO	First Down Dash	Dash For Cash
	Corona Chick	First Prize Rose
		Chicks Beduino
ILLEGAL FEATURE	Feature Mr Jess	Sizzling Lil
	Illegally Special	Mr Jess Perry
		Brenda Feature
		Illegal Runaway
		Special Cutie Doll

"He'd been quitting on the end at 440, and I was worried that they would catch him on the end," he said. "He jumped out in front. It looked like Bon Accord passed him, and he caught them on the end."

The All American Derby victory gave Feature Hero an automatic berth for the \$750,000 Champion of Champions G1 at Los Alamitos on December 14. Trainer Willis already has a leading contender for that race in Priceless Feature, who won the Remington Park Championship G1 in June. Whether Feature Hero has a prep race in Southern California in the autumn is a decision that will be made later, McKinney said.

"I'll leave that up to Eddie and see how he's doing when he gets out there," McKinney said. "We got an invitation to the Champion of Champions, and there is no way we'll pass that up."

Feature Hero will have something to prove in such a race or in a potential prep race such as the Los Alamitos Championship G1 against older horses on October 14.

Feature Hero was fourth in the Rainbow Futurity in 2012 and won a division of the All American Futurity trials, but he has yet to put together consecutive wins in his 14-race career. He has earned \$1,306,638.

"He's better than ever," McKinney said. "He seems to be getting stronger and keeping his weight. This gives us a lot of hope for him winning races."

Bred in Oklahoma by Lana Merrick and Kent Jackson, Feature Hero is out of Illegal Feature, an eight-year-old mare by Feature Mr Jess. Illegal Feature had a single win in 12 starts, a maiden race at Zia Park in 2007. She was third in a division of the All American Futurity trials in 2007 but never qualified for a final of a futurity or derby in five attempts. Her dam, Illegally Special, was second in the 2003 West Texas Futurity G1. Illegally Special is a full sister to the dam of Illegal Te \$118,149. This is the female family of multiple Grade I winner Easily A Rogue \$302,968.

The McKinneys have hired Willis to train their Quarter Horse racing stable, which is growing each year. Gary McKinney is in the oil and gas business in the Midland-Odessa area, a field that Micah McKinney tried briefly after leaving university. Today, Micah and his wife live on Reliance Ranch in Llano, with their two small children. Running the racing stable keeps them busy.

The stable has been in existence for nine years, beginning with an investment at the New Mexico-bred Sale in Ruidoso.

"We bought a few mares and bought a few yearlings, and it snowballed to where we are right now," Micah McKinney said.

"This is all we do. My wife and I run the farm in Llano. We raise 20 to 25 babies and handle race payments and nominations. It's a really good family business."

McKinney, 33, has taken a proactive approach regarding the illegal uses of medication in racing. Along with his wife, he launched Racing Free in 2012, a subscription program that asks horsemen



TRACK Magazine photo/Ben Hudson

Gary McKinney.



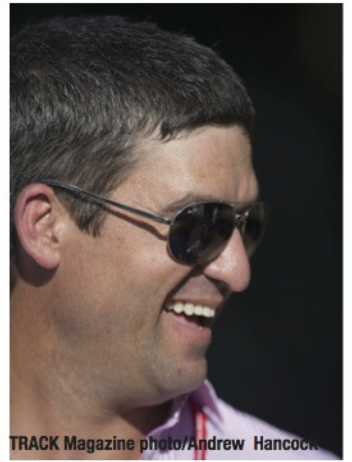
TRACK Magazine photo/Andrew Hancock

Shelia McKinney.



TRACK Magazine photo/Andrew Hancock

Leslie McKinney.



TRACK Magazine photo/Andrew Hancock

Micah McKinney.

to commit to not running horses with illegal medications in exchange for a cash incentive. A horse can be nominated to the program for \$300 at the start of a race meeting. A win by a nominated horse is worth \$1,500, provided that no positive tests for illegal medications occur.

“I attribute a lot of our success in the (All American) Derby to Ruidoso working hard to provide a level playing field,” Micah McKinney said. “The fields in the futurity and derby (had) good owners that are focused on providing a great atmosphere.”

Earlier this year, Reliance Ranches won the \$720,000 Remington Park Oklahoma-Bred Futurity with Coronado Cartel. He was later second in a division of the Rainbow Futurity trials and won a division of the All American Futurity trials, but did not earn a berth in the final.

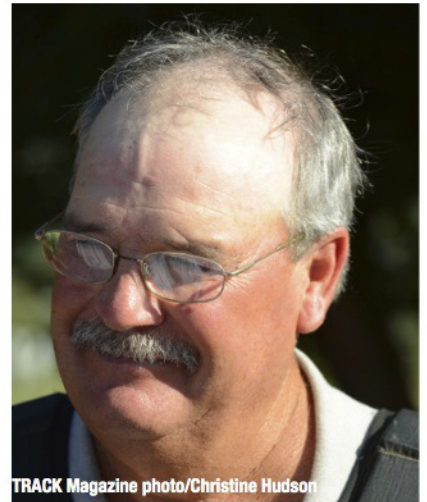
Instead, Feature Hero was the star of the summer for Reliance Ranches, which has a growing presence in Quarter Horse racing. They are the nation’s leader in earnings.

“It hasn’t sunk in completely,” Micah McKinney said of the All American Derby. “It’s an unbelievable feeling to accomplish something that we set out do.”



TRACK Magazine photo/Christine Hudson

Roy and Jimmy Dean Brooks.



TRACK Magazine photo/Christine Hudson

Trainer, Eddie Willis.



TRACK Magazine photo/Ben Hudson

Shaun Hubbard with Leslie and Micah McKinney.



TRACK Magazine photo/Christine Hudson

Feature Hero, the winner.



TRACK Magazine photo/Andrew Hancock

Track photographers capture the win from the roof as Feature Hero wins the big race.

