

Alberta-Breds 'Last' on the Track

By Lindsay Ward

An old timer race horse with a familiar name to many – Highland Leader - is still burning up the track in Alberta this season at the age of 14. This chestnut gelding moved to the B track only this year for his twelfth season and finished up with three wins. Highland Leader by Mr. Leader out of Stage Maid by Hostage Leader now has \$279,972 US\$ or \$458,692 CDN in lifetime earnings. Highland Leader was bred by Jim McDonald of Cayley, Alberta. His past stakes wins include the 1997 Alberta Premier's Futurity, the 1998 Hoofprint on My Heart Handicap and the 2001 Alberta Breeders' Handicap.

Kirsty Luft, who worked with trainer Dale Saunders, is very familiar with Highland Leader after working with him from the time he was 8 or 9 up until he was sold to his current owner, Rae-Lynn Kropius of LK Racing Stables in Raymond, Alberta. Kirsty comments that she has no idea how Highland Leader has managed to have such an extensive career on the track but from what she remembers, he "had a really neat personality". He liked to be the first in line for the daily routine at the track and she often would sit on him for a half hour as the "the old man liked to do his looking around". Kirsty's most recent memories of Highland Leader were of him "dropping" her on the exercise workouts and then going on to win the race each time. This was when he was about 10 years old and "should have known better...he couldn't get past the winners circle without spooking ...this was when he had already won a lot of purse money and had seen the winners circle a lot of times before!" Kirsty believes that Highland Leader embodies what every thoroughbred should look like – classic thoroughbred form and large size.

Rae-Lynn Kropius has now owned Highland Leader for the past year since she and her mother, trainer Linda Kropius, claimed him from the Dale Saunders barn. Rae-Lynn says that "he's a pretty cool horse and he's so beautiful". Rae-Lynn rides him around at home in Raymond, Alberta bareback and thinks she may retire him from the track next year and possible teach him to jump a bit or just ride him for fun. She says she definitely would not send him back to the track as a pony horse as she thinks that would be just "pure torture" for him. When pressed to give reasons why she thinks Highland Leader has outlasted most other horses on the track, Rae-Lynn thinks it might come down to his personality, "he has a really big heart and it's amazing how he wants to train – he loves life". Rae-Lynn also comments that one of Leader's strongest characteristics is his eagerness to be the first one out every morning to work and train – "he trains like a young horse -he'll still try and run off". A contributing factor to his longevity must also be the fact that he is still totally sound at the age of 14 after so many seasons on the track. It sounds like Highland Leader has earned himself a solid spot in the heart of Rae-Lynn and a chance for a great retirement after his lengthy racing career finally comes to a close.

Another Alberta-bred runner foaled in 1995 who lasted a long time on the race track and was a rival of Highland Leader's on numerous occasions is the Regal Remark gelding, Shady Remark. Shady Remark was born the same year as Highland Leader and was bred by Mike and Linda Oslanski of Alberta. Shady Remark ran until he was 12 years old and earned a total of \$303,907 US\$ or \$446,960 CDN in his 10 years on the track. Shady Remark was also trained by Dale Saunders for much of his career and has numerous stakes wins to his credit including the Winnipeg Futurity, the Birdcatcher Stakes, the Yearling Sales Stakes (Highland Leader was second) and the Edmonton

Juvenile all as a two year old; his three year old year saw him earn victories in the Beaufort Stakes (Highland Leader placed second), the Saskatchewan Derby and the President's Handicap (Highland Leader placed third) and his four year old year earned him more victories in the Herald Gold Plate and the Teeworth Plate.

Other Alberta-breds that raced until their senior years were the 1998 gelding Candid Remark, half brother to Shady Remark, who won the Alberta Breeders' Handicap as an 8 year old and placed second in the same race as a 9 year old finishing his career with \$325,845 in earnings; Exclusive Run who ran until he was 10 winning 23 races and \$671,773 in career earnings; the incredible sprinter, Timely Ruckus who also raced until he was 10 earning \$ 618,004 and 17 stakes wins and we all remember Parose by Parlay Me who had \$1,167,503 in career earnings and earned stakes wins until he was 9 years old. Parose is on the list of Oldest Male Graded Stakes Winners (since 1976) recorded in the 2008 Thoroughbred Times Racing Almanac. At 9 years old, Parose won the Durham Cup Handicap in 2003. If Highland Leader continues to run and gets a win in 2010, he will make it into the Thoroughbred Times Racing Almanac on their list of 15 year olds still winning races. It is also interesting to note that, according to the same almanac, the oldest Male Winners (of any race) since 1976 were Behavin Jerry and Golden Arrow and each won a \$1,500 claiming race at the age of 17. Longevity is certainly a great feature in a racehorse but it is without doubt a challenge to pinpoint what factors enable certain horses to possess such a quality.