

## **Hall of Fame Jockey Gary Stevens**

### **Speaks on CTHS Alberta Preview Day**

**By Lindsay Ward**

A highlight of the 2009 Alberta CTHS Yearling Sale was the champagne luncheon and presentation with Legendary Jockey, Gary Stevens, on Monday August 31<sup>st</sup> 2009. As Harvey Trimble, Master of Ceremonies for the event, stated on introducing the Hall of Famer – “He’s truly a living legend in the thoroughbred world”. This event followed the preview and parade of yearlings held on the day prior to the actual sale.

MC Harvey Trimble started the presentation off by giving the listeners a little reminder of Steven’s impressive background - *He got his first start in the thoroughbred world on a little thoroughbred called Lil Star. He won the Kentucky Derby and the Belmont Stakes three times each. He won the Preakness twice. That’s eight Triple Crown wins in his career. He also won the Santa Anita Derby a record nine times. He’s won eight Breeders Cup races making him the fourth leading money winner in Breeders Cup history to date. Please extend a warm welcome to a real star – both in the irons and on the screen – Gary Stevens.*

Stevens began by saying it was his first trip to the area and that Alberta “reminds me a lot of where I was born and raised in Boise, Idaho. He then discussed his rise to the top of the horse racing world. Stevens acknowledged it was his older brother, Scott, - a champion jockey in Boise for five years - who was his mentor and taught him the fundamentals of riding a race horse. Stevens recognized his own humble beginnings by commenting “starting off in Boise – could I ever have imagined how my life might have turned out?” His answer to his own questions was a definitive no.

Steven’s original goal was far more humble than achieving Triple Crown and Hall of Fame titles – he wanted to be leading jockey in La Bois Park in Idaho and earn a living in addition to beating his brother in the game of racing. Stevens credits his brother with motivating him to pursue higher goals when Stevens finished second to his brother two seasons in a row. Like many siblings, Stevens was intent on beating his brother, Scott, and that would mean leaving Idaho for other venues. He left Idaho for Seattle, Washington and the Longacres race course at the age of eighteen and started winning on a few horses. From there, he moved to Vancouver and then worked his way down to California ending up in southern California on what was originally supposed to be a vacation. Stevens laughed at this point noting that the “vacation lasted twenty five years...it was a long vacation! I’ve had a great career”.

Stevens spoke about experiencing his share of injuries and what eventually led him to make the decision to retire from life as a jockey. The particular event that started the retirement thought process was a fall that occurred in 2003 in the Arlington Million at Arlington Park on a horse called *Storming Home*. Stevens had just passed the finish line when his horse spooked at a person on the sidelines and Stevens came off. Stevens somehow escaped with his life but ended up with a collapsed lung, two hairline fractures of his spine and two in his neck. Stevens says “At that point, I started thinking...I’ve had a great, great career. How many times is this going to happen...how many times can you dodge the bullet?”

A couple of years later, Stevens was the jockey for a horse called *Rock Hard Ten* who he considers one of the two best horses he ever had the opportunity to ride. He was a favourite to win the 2005 Breeders Cup Classic but received a 5 AM phone call from trainer Richard Mandela saying the horse would not be competing. Rock Hard Ten had heat issues in addition to a quarter crack and the decision was to retire him. Stevens said “I’m done” and that marked the end of his career as a rider and the beginning of a new career in the horse world as a commentator and breeder/trainer. Right after his retirement decision, Stevens bought his first horses, some broodmares, at the November Keeneland Sales. He notes that, compared to life as a jockey, being a trainer and owner involves many more ups and downs. As a jockey, he just had to think about the ride and the next horse he was going to be on. Now he has to worry about many more things – why a particular horse got beat, why a horse is not running well, communication with owners among many other details.

After the discussion of his own rise to fame, Stevens moved on to give the audience his thoughts on the current economy and its effect on the world of horse racing – “it’s trying times, not just for North America but for the whole world”. He mentioned a recent trip to cover the Dubai World Cup and his observation that this country that had absolutely thrived over the past twenty years appears to be at a standstill. Stevens trusts that the horse racing industry will prosper again noting that it has suffered trying times in the early seventies and eighties and came back stronger than ever. He further commented that “History keeps repeating itself and these are by far the toughest times we have seen since the Great Depression and they can keep calling this a recession but it was a Depression for awhile - in my opinion – and I think that it’s the way things equalize. It’s a reality check for everyone.”

Stevens notes he is buying horses now as he believes strongly that we are in a great buyer’s market and that horses can be purchased at premium prices that have not been offered for the past twenty years. He gave the example of a horse that he took to the select sale in Lexington recently and sold for far less than he believed she was worth. Stevens thought if the filly was sired by a more “fashionable” sire than Thunder Gulch, she would have achieved a far higher price. He ended up buying her back for \$12,000 and sold her just after the sale for \$10,000 – “I would have liked to have been the guy on the other side”. Stevens strongly believes that there are great buyers opportunities at the moment and a lot of good, quality horses are being offered at “basement” prices.

Stevens views partnerships and syndicates as a great way to become involved in the world of racing commenting that this format offers a chance to become involved at a more affordable price. The current buyers market offers great deals and partnerships and syndicates stop buyers from “putting all their eggs in one basket” with diversification of ownership.

In his comments on the CTHS Alberta summer sale, Stevens noted that he saw a lot of black type and impressive pedigrees on the pages. He saw a lot of pedigrees from families he was very familiar with and some from the horses that he had actually ridden!” Stevens thinks that “a good horse can come from anywhere and good horsemen are everywhere”. He is close friends with the Calgarian that trained Rock Hard Ten as a three year old – Jason Orman. Stevens commented that Orman is a very impressive horseman and spent his early days at Stampede Park and Northlands Park and tracks all over Alberta.

Stevens summarizes his thoughts on what is important as a buyer of thoroughbreds by stating that he thinks a person must be careful to listen to themselves when making purchase decisions. It is too easy to get caught up in the impressions of others and what is fashionable at the time and miss opportunities. While it is important to have an advisor if you want or need one, it is also important to go with your intuition on making purchase decisions – “if you look at a horse and you like it and you think there’s potential there – go with your instincts...go with your gut”.

Stevens wrapped up the event with a final comment that the sport is worth all the hard work and dedication it takes as “the ups in this sport way outweigh the lows – you get that one moment where you walk in the winner’s circle and get your picture taken and it makes you forget about the bad times!”