

An Inspiration to Us All

By Lindsay Ward

Holly Crichton had a childhood most horse crazy girls can only dream about with parents that worked as gardeners on Canada's largest working cattle ranch, the Douglas Lake Ranch, near Merritt B.C. Holly had unlimited opportunities to ride and no limits to where she could go with access to a half million acres of land. Mr. CN Woodward, the owner of the Douglas Lake Ranch during the 1960s, developed an extensive Quarter Horse operation with impressive bloodlines after the purchase of well known foundation Quarter Horses, Stardust Desire and Peppy San. Holly noted that 'Chunky' Woodward was not an absentee ranch owner but a real horseman who came out to ride his Quarter Horses on a regular basis and whose ranch "was a passion for him". Holly competed in cutting and rodeo events and her time on the ranch set in motion a love of horses that would last a life time. She had to make a tough decision however when it was time to leave home and the ranch and make her way in the world. She also had an interest in art as well as horses and artwork and riding were "absolutely her two passions" making it a difficult choice between art school and pursuing a career in the horse world. Her love of horses won out after Holly "accidentally discovered" a talent for riding racehorses and a love of the sport of racing, "Once I tasted it, I was hooked". Her interest combined with her small size made a career as a jockey a realistic prospect and in 1979, she embarked upon her new career going wherever she could find horses to ride at the bush tracks of Alberta and Saskatchewan and later to the A tracks in Alberta at Calgary and Edmonton. She had a lot of success on both circuits and as Alberta horse trainer and breeder Maxine Anderson notes, "She is and was an extremely popular person throughout horse racing in Alberta and rode for most of the people at the racetrack in Edmonton". The racing bug also extended to Holly's cousin, Chris Loseth, who was leading rider in B.C. for many years. Holly quit the A track in 1994 and concentrated just on the B track as her children were becoming teenagers and she wanted more stability in her life for them. *Photo of Holly on Gotta Be Go

The world changed dramatically for Holly after a freak disaster in Grand Prairie in 1996 during an Arab race when a horse went down on her during a race. The accident left Holly paralyzed from the chest down and put an end to the racing career that she loved so much and had been the mainstay of her life for such a long time. As Holly puts it "you go through your whole career and then get on a horse that wasn't broke properly and that's the end of it". At this point in time, many individuals would simply give

up and accept the new realities imposed upon them by such unfortunate circumstances. Holly says she was “down and out” for about a year but slowly realized her devotion to horses and desire to have them in her life had not gone away. She “remembered that part of my nature” and although the harsh reality of her new situation meant that racing was obviously no longer an option, Holly was determined to get back on a horse one way or another. She had a special saddle made that would enable her to stay on a horse’s back and with a horse that would tolerate her special demands, she got back on and even chased cows again. Holly was true to herself by following through with her goals and riding yet again after the accident but after a period of time, she realized that while “her passion for horses was still there, the practicality wasn’t. I just had to do it but it wasn’t the same and was never going to be”.

****Holly on Junior

Holly may have stopped riding but she didn’t stop making horses the focal point of her life. An opportunity was uncovered to re-discover her art talents with horses and the racing world as the central theme and motivating force. She began to paint again and started setting up at art exhibits in the area and branching out to art shows in Calgary, Edmonton and Grand Prairie for about five years becoming the most involved person in Grand Prairie with the art shows. The dedication and commitment she had demonstrated in her racing career was now channelled into her artwork. Through her artwork, Holly met Phil Alain who had created the now highly successful Night of Artists or NOA Productions a couple of years earlier. Holly was introduced to Phil by her nephew who played hockey with him in St. Albert. The Night of Artists was founded in 1997 in St. Alberta, Alberta and began as a solo art show in a little community hall with 20 framed charcoal drawings by Alain and had a sold out room of 150 guests. The Night of Artists has now been showcased to thousands across Canada in such major centers as Toronto, Ottawa, Calgary, Victoria, and Edmonton and to many smaller communities throughout the country. It has created a unique product by uniting all art forms into one exciting event and has “made its mark by helping to promote the careers of many aspiring artists, poets, musicians, dancers, writers and more”.

Holly’s involvement with Phil Alain and the Night of Champions allowed her to exhibit her artwork and showcase her talents to many people across Alberta. As Phil comments, Holly was instrumental in the decision to hold the first Night of Artists show ever to be held in Grand Prairie. He remembered that Holly did more than any other individual to plan and organize the Grand Prairie show and her “incredible drive and determination that make her such an inspiration as a person. Absolutely nothing gets in her way”. Phil also finds Holly to be a personal inspiration to him due to her resolve and willpower. If Phil is

having difficulty in his life, he thinks “If she can fight through anything that she’s going through, then I certainly can fight through anything in my life. It’s hard to put into words what she is like as a person”.

Through her association with Phil Alain, Holly also became involved with a very exciting project of international acclaim titled Le Cadeau Du Cheval or The Horse Gift - a mosaic of 238 panels created by artists from across Canada, the U.S., South America, Europe and Australia. Holly was commissioned to paint panel number 84 in this Mural Mosaic and submit it to be exhibited in the mosaic. Phil Alain along with his partners, Lewis Lavoie and Paul Lavoie, created the Mural Mosaic exhibits which bring “unity through diversity” and bring together hundreds of individual paintings created by hundreds of artists into one unifying image. Each painting portrays an artist’s unique style and when a painting is completed, it is carefully placed in sequence within the mural to assemble one masterpiece. Le Cadeau Du Cheval is the first international project and in 2008, Mural Mosaic invited the Equine artists’ community to submit work to be considered for a panel in this impressive undertaking. Holly chose to present a watercolour painting of a racehorse for her panel called “I Win Again” about which she comments “When I’m painting horse racing pictures, it’s always me in front, that’s the glory of painting my own story.” Holly says she “absolutely” sees herself out in the front of the race as the jockey on this horse, “That’s what you always strive for, is to do the best, no matter what you are doing”. In Holly’s words, “If I could, I would still be at the race track, but, I have to deal with reality and the reality is that that part of my life is over. It’s extremely hard for me to go to the track now, it feels like I’m locked in a cage when I look at the horses training or racing and I’m sitting in a chair watching them. Doing artwork is a bit of a substitute and I’m glad to have that option, maybe some day I will be content to own race horses and not be able to ride them; I just haven’t reached that point yet.” ***Photo of Holly’s Mosaic-I Win Again

About four years ago, Holly and her family faced another challenge as her youngest son, Matt, was severely injured in an auto accident and needed extensive rehabilitation. Horses once more provided a source of motivation for both Holly and her son as she took Matt to the racetrack in Grand Prairie so he could watch the races and relate to something “he knew from before”. The visits continued on a regular basis for two years with Holly believing that the racetrack outings were a vital link in helping Matt’s memory to return. Holly lives with her husband, Sandy, on a 900 acre ranch called Toad Valley Ranch near Grand Prairie where they raise beef cattle and she competes with stock dogs. For Holly, “my dogs are my legs on the ranch” and help her to keep up with many of the ranch chores and jobs. She did get her first dog before her accident and competed once with her. Holly was going to give the dog away afterwards but a friend of hers told her to “quit being a sissy and get your butt out there!” She now

competes regularly with her three border collies in stock dog trials and competitions in the area and plans to host a stock dog competition at her ranch in the summer of 2009. Holly says the stock dog training is intensive with not being much difference between the amount of time it takes to train a racehorse and a stock dog. Holly has recently decided to step back from the art world for a time to try her hand at the investment world after a mentor in the stock dog world introduced her to it. She says it is "out of the realm of anything I've done before and I'm kind of excited and pleased to have stumbled upon it!" One thing we know for sure is that Holly will show the same kind of dedication and commitment in her new venture that she has shown in her past challenges and will have success regardless of the challenges that come her way. *****Photo of Holly with Dog – the one of her in the field with one dog

To sum up her feelings, Holly says "Riding race horses was the love of my life and I'm profoundly grateful to have had the opportunities and experiences I had. I often had the thought as I was sitting on a horse that *Riding race horses is what I was born to do*. Often, I would feel euphoric sitting up on a good honest horse and when I was in a race, it would almost feel like I was flying. I miss those feelings in my body but they are always going to be in my mind".