

SMART DATE : 1987 NCHA FUTURITY

Smart Little Lena's Legacy Begins

By Leon Harrel

This is not just another story about a horse I developed and won the NCHA Futurity on. It's about a very special and beautiful little mare who was the first Smart Little Lena baby to win the futurity. What makes her so special is that she was also out of his very first foal crop. Historically speaking, he was responsible for starting the infamous Smart Little Lena Legacy of Futurity Champions that continues to this day.

The cast of people and horses in this story are all very important to me and they all helped me on my journey to the both the Futurity and the rest of my life. Let me introduce you to them... RL Waltrip (Bob) was the most wonderful client and friend anyone could ask for. Bob and I had a lot of wins and great times together. We were close enough that he never questioned my judgment when it came to horses.

Bill Freeman and I became friends through my close relationship with his father Shorty. I would work horses in the morning in Scottsdale, AZ, and in the afternoon pull a bucking barrel for Bill – he thought he wanted to be a bull rider back then.

Shorty Freeman was my mentor, coach and greatest friend. He was always there for me no matter what. In addition to being my friend, he was also my hero. Shorty was by far the most humane and gifted trainer I have ever known. He believed in developing horses through motivation – never fear and pain. I never saw a horse be nervous around Shorty, they always felt safe with him. He had amazing hands and balance on a horse and could coax the very best out of the very worst of them. Somehow, in Shorty's hands, bad horses weren't bad anymore. That knowledge shaped my future and I strove to be as much like him as possible.

Early one May morning I got a call from Bob asking me how the futurity horses were looking. I told him they were doing pretty good. I didn't think there were any superstars in the bunch, but I did believe they would be competitive. Bob knew the difference and could appreciate the ones with star quality. He and I had a lot of futurity finalists together (Oak Doll, Nu&Sassy, Peppy Playmate, Son's Georgette, Pavos Playmate) so he knew what to look for. He also trusted me enough to turn me loose with his checkbook to buy high dollar horses for him sight unseen. He thought for a moment then said to me, "Go ahead and find us a winner!" I told him, "Bob, it's going to be very expensive, and you know it's a gamble. You can't buy the futurity, it's always a crap shoot." He laughed and replied, "We've been close a lot of times, I have a hunch it'll be our turn this year."

So began my quest for the ideal futurity horse. I must have talked to over 20 trainers and owners, and the one freshman sire's name that kept popping up over and over in conversation, was a new stallion whose first foal crop was debuting at the upcoming futurity. His name was Smart Little Lena.

I called Bill and told him I needed a really special prospect, and asked if he had anything I might be interested in. He said he had some really nice 3yo's that might fit me, and that I should come up, spend the night and try them out. So I drove up and the next morning we worked the

young horses. Two of them I wasn't crazy about, but I really fell in love with the third one called Smart Little Lana. She worked beautifully for me. I got very excited because I knew she was the one I'd been looking for. I told Bill I'd take her right then and there. He told me that she belonged to a man in Canada, and he needed to make a call to see if she was "still available"... 5 minutes later, he returned with the news that the owner had suddenly changed his mind, she was no longer for sale (at any price).

I was very disappointed, I wanted her very badly and instinctively knew that Bill had seen something in her that day that he had previously missed. At least I knew what I was going to be up against, this was a very high class, talented mare and I knew I needed some serious horsepower to compete with these new Smart Little Lena's.

Bill, seeing my obvious disappointment, mentioned that his father Shorty had a horse I might like. He told me, "She's wild and crazy, just like you like 'em, she'll be perfect for you!" So I called Shorty and he confirmed it. When I asked just how wild and crazy she was, he said, "She's pretty wild Leon. The good news is, she's not quite as wild as Doc's Date Bar. She'll be easy for you to finish, trust me." He finally convinced me when he said, "By the way, her mother's a full sister to Doc's Date Bar and all those other mares that made you famous. I think you'll love her."

So I loaded up and headed to Shorty's to see what kind of wild child he had waiting for me to try. Shorty loved to challenge me and never doubted my skill and ability with horses others didn't have the patience for. I arrived about 1pm to find everything ready and waiting for me. Shorty and I talked about her for awhile, went over both the pros and cons of her. Shorty had been real sick and had not been able to work her much at all but he had coached his girl Robin through most of the training process up to that point.

Well, they were right, she was a wild, talented, big stopping mare that was weak on her ends but every time a cow looked at her, she'd freeze and stare a hole right through them. I knew immediately that she had exactly what I was looking for. I had lucked out and found another very special horse, perhaps even better than the other mare... I also knew it was up to me to make it happen for her.

I spent that night with Shorty and Gay and over dinner I asked him point blank if he really thought I could put her together in the time I had and make it work. He said, "Heck Leon, she'll be very easy compared to those other mares. She's real smart and real sensitive, she was made for you."

I bought the mare, called Bob, filled him in on her, and he was thrilled. I couldn't wait to get her home and start finishing her, I was so excited. I had a mare with all the key ingredients I needed, and I was really anxious to get after it!

I thought the mare was pretty wild at Shorty's, but I hadn't seen anything yet... When I got her home and introduced her to her new, but strange surroundings, things got a little western. At the end of our first day, I thought to myself, Bob is going to kill me. That evening I had a lot to think about and I did. Mostly, I thought about my experience with Doc's Date Bar, they were

quite similar so I decided to use some of the same techniques that had helped me to develop her confidence and talent. I knew it would take a lot of alone time in order to develop her trust. I was certain once I had it though, we would be something to reckon with. We spent many afternoons riding the trails through the hill country.

Smart Date came along very quickly,

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to spend time at Larry's that summer. He offered me his place in Colorado to work cattle to prepare my horses. It was perfect for us, because when we were done with the cattle, once again, she and I would relax and take off for leisurely rides in the mountains during the afternoons. It was the ideal formula for my hot little firecracker, I really loved that time I spent with her.

Bob flew up and joined us on his way to Steamboat Springs to see how things were going. It was his first time seeing his new mare and after watching her work, he said, "Wow Leon, she's dynamite! Sure you can get all that under control by futurity time?" "Well, Shorty said I could" I replied to which he responded with a laugh, "Well, sure don't want to disappoint Shorty do we?"

Things continued to progress nicely and as the futurity approached, Smart Date and Smart Little Lana (Bill's mare) were the talk of the town at the Abilene practice works that year. During the futurity, Bill and I kept swapping places throughout the go rounds and semis, and my score kept getting better with each trip. There were 21 horses in the finals because of a tie, with eleven horses in the first bunch and ten in the second. To add to the excitement I had the dream draw, eleventh in the first bunch.

Against the wishes of his wife and doctor, Shorty came out to help me in every round. He was there every step of the way for me. It would be the last time he ever entered Will Rogers on horseback. It meant the world to me and I will always cherish his memories. Shorty was like a father to me, he was my one and only real hero.

1987 was a banner year for me in many ways. It was the first year the NCHA decided to produce a video for national television. They hired my partner in crime, Larry Mahan, to narrate and host the film, we had a ball that year! It was a really well done, great video called Cuttin' it up in the 80's - The 1987 and 1988 Futurities.

The day of the final go, the competition was fierce. As usual, the riders ahead of me had worked all the best calves over pretty good, not leaving much worthwhile. They weren't all good to begin with, so that narrowed my choices even more by the time it was my turn. Shorty and I were looking at the herd and he asked me what I was going to cut. I didn't have a clue. All the decent ones had already been cut. Then he said, "That big paint cow is still fresh..." I knew the paint cow was fresh, I'd watched her laying on the back fence throughout the entire go round, she hadn't come off it once yet. It would be awful tough to drive her out through 50 head of cattle from that spot with her attitude. However, I knew if I could pull it off, I'd look like a hero. Or not... It was pretty risky, but my choices were extremely limited and it was my turn to dance.

They called my name, Shorty looked at me, grinned, "Well?" I nodded back, "It's why we came, let's do it" and off to the herd we went. I headed to the back wall and eased in gently behind her bringing her up steadily with a group of about 6 or 7 other cows. Gosh dang if we didn't execute a dead center, beautiful cut! We'd pulled it off and that paint was ours! To this day, I still think she was the best cow ever cut in that arena. I worked her for 56 seconds, finished up with a second cow and marked a 225 to win the open division. Ironically, the only other horse to score a 225 up to that point had been Smart Little Lena in 1982. This acorn didn't fall far from the tree.

Bill followed up third with Smart Little Lana. It was a banner year for Smart Little Lena's first foal crop, and I was honored to have the privilege of riding that savvy little mare Smart Date to the winner's circle. Her lifetime earnings were \$142,511 twenty four years ago! She was undoubtedly one of the best mares I've ever developed. She was retired and started breeding at the age of five.

After the show was over that night, I grabbed the cattleman before he loaded up and told him to cut that paint cow out and ship her to me. I was determined to return the favor that night and save her life. She was delivered to my ranch in Kerrville and lived her days out there.

After the futurity, Western Horseman asked me to write a book on Cutting for them and Randy Witte came to the ranch to interview me for it. We talked about that big night and he wanted a photo of me on Smart Date with the paint cow. I'd turned that cow out in my pasture and warned anyone who even thought about cutting her would be shot. So that day, I saddled Smart Date up and out to the pasture we went to find her. We flushed some cattle out of the brush and she was among them. I eased in behind them and slowly drove her up through the others. When I had her separated, she looked up at Smart Date, they locked eyes, dropped down simultaneously and danced a few licks for us all by themselves! It was déjà vu and I wasn't the only one who felt it... It was pure magic!

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