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Mr. Commons won nearly \$1 million on the racetrack and has made a successful transition to dressage with Emily Brollier Curtis.



BOD HARDY PHOTOS



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a red and white striped polo shirt, is smiling and holding the lead rope of a brown horse. The horse has a white blaze on its face and is wearing a black halter. The background is dark.

AMAZING MAKEOVERS

Thoroughbreds back in fashion
thanks to popular competition

By Liane Crossley

To those who listen, horses can indeed talk. Sometimes they speak in riddles; other times they virtually shout with actions and reactions. At the 2017 Thoroughbred Makeover Oct. 5-8 at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, they will tell the world that racehorses are capable of far more than racing. The annual competition of jumping, barrel racing, dressage, and other categories offers \$100,000 in prize money and has brought Thoroughbreds back into fashion as hard-working, athletic steeds suitable for countless activities.

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Curtis quickly established a bond with Mr. Commons.

Destination dressage

Mr. Commons had something to say to Emily Brollier Curtis in his early transition from top-class racer to promising mount for dressage, which requires precise movements from the rider's subtle cues.

"I rode him the first time like he was a baby, and I swear he looked at me as if to say, 'stop it and start riding me like I am an adult,' " Curtis said. "He loves the harder stuff. He thinks going sideways is really fun."

Curtis is one of 578 trainers for this year's Makeover that has attracted 643 horses. Her search for a prospect serendipitously led her to Mr. Commons, thanks to a friend's tip that the horse needed a new career after earning nearly \$1 million on the track with five victories in 29 starts. His resumé includes winning two graded races, finishing third in the 2013 Maker's 46 Mile Stakes at Keeneland, and twice running in the Breeders' Cup Mile for Ian and Carrie Banwell's St. George Farm.



Michelle and Jim Morehead, who bred and raised Sensational Game, are excited about the next phase of her career.

"It played out perfectly," Curtis said. "The Banwells are excited to have a horse in the Makeover that they bred, raised, and retired. Now they have a dressage horse. He's so fancy and fun. He fits in perfectly in my program."

The 9-year-old gelding has gained the nickname Taco at the Nicholasville, Kentucky, division of Curtis' Miramonte Equine. She credits Mr. Commons' seamless development in the show ring to his post-racing care at St. George Farm in Lexington.

"They gave him plenty of down time before he went into training with me," she said. "He was handled correctly every day by really solid horsemen. That was a big part of it."

In addition to serving as a platform for the Thoroughbred's versatility, the Makeover displays the trainers' expertise.

"The Makeover has put trainers like me in a great position because it showcases me as a dressage trainer who can train off-track Thoroughbreds," Curtis said. "You wouldn't believe the number of people who call me and tell me they saw me in the Makeover and ask for help with their Thoroughbreds."

Central Kentucky-based dressage specialist Linda Strine has seen a similar shift in her business, thanks in part to the Makeover.

In the past Strine tended to avoid Thoroughbreds because clients had little desire for them.

"I was not all that interested in training Thoroughbreds because they were not popular among dressage and show hunter riders," she said. "As a trainer, it would have been hard to resell a Thoroughbred because there were not many people interested in buying them. But now there is interest again for Thoroughbreds."

Her Makeover mount Sensational Game is a 4-year-old filly owned, bred, and raised by Michelle Morehead and her husband, James Morehead, a veterinarian. The couple gave the charming and athletic filly the opportunity to excel at the rac-

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Left, Morehead actively participates with trainer Linda Strine in the filly's dressage education.



Strine and Sensational Game won top score for a Thoroughbred at a major dressage show this spring.

es, and in her fourth and final career start, Sensational Game flashed enough talent to win a maiden claiming race last year at Tampa Bay Downs. The Moreheads thought she lacked the ability for upper-level competition and that her athleticism would be better suited for the show ring. On a bit of a whim, the Moreheads and Strine opted to re-channel the filly's talents toward the Makeover. Michelle Morehead said she hopes to sell her filly, now known as Satie, to someone able to continue showing her in dressage.

When reschooling began, Sensational Game was a fledgling by sport horse standards, but she was a seasoned professional in the Thoroughbred world and ready for her next adventure. Despite their vast life experiences, Strine treats off-track Thoroughbreds the same way she handles inexperienced youngsters. Remedial classes begin after the racers have had rest and relaxation and include plenty of riderless lunge-line exercises.



Strine appreciates the worldliness of former racehorses.

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“Thoroughbreds have been handled so much and they are super broke,” Strine said. “They have seen a lot of stuff. For their age they are way ahead compared to other young horses that I ride in terms of handling and experience. They are a little more worldly wise.”

Hunting for show hunters

In her constant search for untapped Thoroughbred talent that began in 1970, Jean Carmichael has uncovered countless treasures. Her original discovery at a small-time track was a scrawny gelding with a kind face that spoke volumes. She closed the deal for a few hundred dollars and transformed him into a fancy show horse who collected more than his share of ribbons.

Although not specifically shopping for a 2016 Makeover candidate, Carmichael found a gem in Greeley's Magic, winner of the 2016 Makeover as a 3-year-old in the show hunter division with Tyler Weith in the saddle. Carmichael found “Maggie” on a scouting mission to the Keeneland-owned The Thoroughbred Center on Paris Pike.

“Thoroughbreds that don't want to be racehorses are always on my radar,” Carmichael said. “She was a doll baby, and I instantly liked her.”

Greeley's Magic fits the profile of Thoroughbreds that for myriad reasons do not take to the racing business and was a has-been at the tender age of 2. After three starts at low levels, Greeley's Magic had defeated only two rivals and earned \$256. Carmichael looked past those stats and saw a pleasant equine personality, one of her requirements. Her recruits also must look pretty while jumping, so Carmichael tested the filly's athletic ability by fashioning a jump of buckets and a mop handle in the barn at the training center. After watching a handler lead her over the obstacle, Carmichael made an offer and took Greeley's Magic home.

The transformation from racetrack loser to show ring winner was not always smooth for the spirited filly and for Weith, a young upper-level rider with no prior experience with a newly retired Thoroughbred.



MEGAN STAPLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

THOROUGHBRED MAKEOVER SPRINTS TO SUCCESS

Steuart Pittman Jr.'s vision became reality so quickly it is hard to believe the Retired Racehorse Project's Thoroughbred Makeover is so young. The event offering \$100,000 in prize money will be held at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington Oct. 5-8 for the third straight year after launching in 2013 at Pimlico Race Course.

The RRP was started to increase the popularity of Thoroughbreds as sport horses and pleasure mounts. The annual Makeover serves as a showcase with competition including jumping, barrel racing, trail riding, polo, dressage, and ranching. Entrants must be registered Thoroughbreds that have raced or had an official workout after July 1, 2015, but have not been retrained prior to December 2016. Approved professionals and amateurs can ride their own or others' horses. A total of 643 horses and 578 riders have been accepted to this year's Makeover, which is funded by contributions from title sponsor Thoroughbred Charities of America, racing-related organizations, and private donations (see page 104).

“People have rediscovered the talent and trainability of ex-racehorses,” said Pittman, RRP founder and president. “Demand for these horses is on the rise. Racehorses are being sold for new careers through networks of trainers and agents at prices that are often double what we saw just three years ago.”

Prior to launching the RRP in 2010, Pittman had developed a reputation for repurposing former racers. He specializes in transitioning Thoroughbreds into mounts for eventing, in which horses jump fences in fields and arenas and also perform precision movements in dressage. While working tirelessly on his passion, Pittman absorbed the results of his mission when the Makeover first moved to the Kentucky Horse Park.

“When I paused to feel the energy, I was rewarded for my work,” he said. “Others on our organizing team had the same experience. Effectively bringing a group of people together to accomplish a worthy mission is a good thing. When that process also connects them to earth's most magnificent domesticated creature — the Thoroughbred horse — it's really hard to beat.”

—Liane Crossley

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Jean Carmichael and rider Tyler Weith won the hunter division of the 2016 Thoroughbred Makeover with Greeley's Magic.

"She was exuberant to say the least, but trainable," Carmichael said. "Bucks and squeals are part of her personality, but she had a great work ethic and got better every day."

With nearly a half century of experience restarting racehorses, Carmichael compares them to children looking for leadership through patience and guidance.

"It is up to us to identify their talent

and put them in work that makes the best use of that talent," she said. "Repetition and consistency are key. I build the program slowly and methodically so the horse gains confidence. Some learn more quickly than others."

In addition to winning the Makeover, Greeley's Magic made a believer of Weith, who plans to incorporate more off-track Thoroughbreds into his program.



Rider Cathy Wieschhoff and Jessica Bollinger celebrate Speed Rail's eventing victory.

"We are the beneficiaries of the qualities Thoroughbreds possess," Carmichael said. "They are the essence of power and grace — a true work of art with hearts that beat for the people who love them."

Excellence in eventing

Cathy Wieschhoff's extensive experience in converting race-horses into sport horses was on full display at the 2016 Makeover. Like many other participants, Wieschhoff entered herself before securing her rides because she knew the right equine contenders would eventually find her as they have since she moved to Lexington in 1978. "It wasn't intentional the way it is now when attention is drawn to these horses that need

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a home after the track,” she said. “It was more like people saying ‘my friend has one that didn’t race well, so can you see if it will fox hunt or event?’ ”

She took first place with Speed Rail and third place with Title Contender in the 2016 Makeover eventing category, which consists of a dressage test, a cross country phase over obstacles, and show jumping in the arena.

Like those early prospects, Speed Rail and Title Contender landed at Wieschhoff’s Carriage Station Farm in Lexington through casual networking in the tightly knit Central Kentucky horse community. Both benefited from Wieschhoff’s skill with natural horsemanship techniques.

In her early experiences Wieschhoff thought OTTBs fit the stereotype of being overly impulsive and quick. In hindsight she thinks this was because they were not properly transitioned from track life. Because horses have plenty of idle time at the trailer or ringside when showing, Wieschhoff’s goal is to get horses into a relaxed frame of mind. This also makes them easy to ride even if they have had several days without activity.

“Retraining them with natural horsemanship has been a game changer,” she said. “I get horses used to hanging out.”



COURTESY OF RETIRED RACEHORSE PROJECT



SHARAH K. ANDREW

Top, participants in the Makeover’s hunter division await their turns. Above, Lauren Turner guided Fairway King to the top prize of America’s Most Wanted Thoroughbred last year.

RETIRED RACEHORSE PROJECT THOROUGHBRED MAKEOVER



WHAT

Competition for ex-racehorses that includes jumping, barrel racing, trail riding, polo, dressage, and ranching



WHEN

Oct. 5-8



WHERE

Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington



WHY

To encourage rehoming of Thoroughbreds by increasing demand for them in equestrian sports



TOTAL PRIZE MONEY

\$100,000



ENTRIES

643 Thoroughbreds and 578 riders

Other activities at the show: seminars, sponsor fair, horse sale
More information: www.retiredracehorseproject.org



Wieschhoff and Title Contender show their form on cross country.

The process includes having a horse stand in Carriage Station's covered open-air arena while tethered to a rope from the ceiling. "I like them to see activity," Wieschhoff said. "They hang out while I give lessons so they get to see jumping, hear rails falling, and get used to horses being around them."

A later retraining phase is going to horse shows for leisurely strolls around the grounds without added pressure of competing.

Speed Rail and Title Contender learned to chill out this way and are excelling at eventing. Prior to their new careers, both were successful at the track.

Speed Rail made 15 of his 17 career starts at Indiana Grand, where he was stakes-placed against fellow rivals born in the Hoosier State. He closed his career in a bottom-level claiming race at age 5 before earning the nickname "Speedy" in his new life.

The aptly labeled Title Contender has always been something of an overachiever. As a handsome and blue-blooded weanling, he was sold for \$310,000 at the 2010 Keeneland November sale. At 2, he won his second career start before running in the Breeders'

MAKEOVER FUNDING

Sponsors, donations, and volunteers support the Retired Racehorse Project and Thoroughbred Makeover. Supporters include:

- Thoroughbred Charities of America (title sponsor)
- Bourbon Lane Stables
- Godolphin
- Thoroughbred Education Research Foundation
- Zylkene
- NFP
- 90 North Racing Stable
- Accuhorsemat
- Omega Alpha
- Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association
- Hagyard Equine Medical Institute
- ASPCA grant
- Triple Crown Nutrition
- Juddmonte Farms
- Hidden Brook Farm
- Nutramax Cosequin
- Masters of Foxhounds Association of America
- Private donations (\$45 includes Off-track Thoroughbred magazine)

Cup Juvenile. After winning the Ohio Derby, Title Contender headed to Western Canada to win the British Columbia Derby before closing his 27-race career with a \$343,153 bankroll. Title Contender was claimed from his final race in 2015 and returned to his breeder in Kentucky.

He is now known around the barn as Sheldon because of his distinctive face marking reminiscent of the seahorse of the same name in the cartoon movie Finding Nemo.

"The recognition from the Makeover is a game changer for these horses because the word is out there and there are more avenues now for people to find horses off the track," Wieschhoff said. **KM**