

By Claire Novak

Last year Willis Horton's Will Take Charge galloped through victories in the Smarty Jones Stakes and the Rebel Stakes, survived the rigors of the Triple Crown trail, and emerged to win the Travers, Pennsylvania Derby, and Clark Handicap with a runner-up finish by a nose in the Breeders' Cup Classic. Those accomplishments secured him a title as champion 3-year-old male of 2013, but before he was "the big horse," the D. Wayne Lukas trainee broke his maiden going seven furlongs on the Polytrack at Keeneland in the fall of 2012.



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SALES STAR: Will Take Charge first came to Keeneland in 2011, consigned by Hill 'n' Dale Sales agency to the September yearling sale. Hill 'n' Dale's John Sikura had purchased the Kentucky-bred as a foal from the group that owns his dam, multiple grade I winner Take Charge Lady. The leggy youngster caught Lukas' eye.

SOMETHING SPECIAL: "This colt was very much Wayne's type," said Reiley McDonald of Eaton Sales, which bred Will Take Charge. "He likes to see the big shoulder and the big engine. Years ago he quit buying the Quarter Horse sprinter type and started buying horses that were classic-distance horses. That's exactly what this horse was from both the pedigree and physical standpoint, and Wayne saw something special in him."

FAMILY TREE: Will Take Charge's pedigree couldn't get much better. His sire was the late 1995 Breeders' Cup Juvenile winner turned successful stallion Unbridled's Song, and Take Charge Lady was a \$2.4 million earner who won or placed in 16 stakes, including three grade I's at Keeneland. Half brother Take Charge Indy was also a star, taking home the 2012 Florida Derby and coming back to ace the Alysheba Stakes in 2013.

BIDDING WAR: The hammer fell at \$425,000. As soon as it did, Lukas walked down the aisle to congratulate Horton — he'd been bidding on the colt independently but saw the owner in action and quit. Lukas told

Horton, "This will be a running sonofagun."

TRAINED IN TEXAS: Will Take Charge headed to Twin Oaks Training Center near Murchison, Texas, where Eddie Milligan started him under saddle. The former jockey remembered Will Take Charge as a quick study.

"He was an extremely big baby," Milligan said. "He had a very nice stride; he was very athletic and talented. We had him in the front part of the barn and not everybody knew who he was, but everybody fell in love with him because he was such a sweet horse."

OLD-SCHOOL OWNER: Horton knows a good runner when he sees one. A former rodeo rider — "When me and my wife were going together, we'd always rodeo; she'd barrel race and I'd do calf roping" — he grew up in Marshall, Ark., and caught the racing bug at Oaklawn Park. He has owned racehorses since the late 1960s.

"He's old-school," Lukas said. "He lets you do your job and he's very knowledgeable ... He understands that a horse like Will Take Charge only comes around once in a while."

MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS: The best horses Horton has raced — Will Take Charge, sprinter Laurie's Rocket, and 2006 Kentucky Oaks winner Lemons Forever — all passed the six-figure mark at auction. Lemons Forever was a \$140,000 purchase at the 2004 Keeneland September sale, while Horton went to \$300,000 for Laurie's Rocket at the September sale in 2010. Laurie's Rock-

et is a graded stakes-placed runner who has collected \$512,598 in earnings. Lemons Forever, retired with earnings of \$648,940, sold for \$2.5 million to R.J. Bennett as a broodmare prospect at the 2007 Keeneland November breeding stock sale.

LIKE BIG BRO: Will Take Charge followed in the footsteps of Take Charge Indy when breaking his maiden on Polytrack; one year older, the son of A.P. Indy made four starts on the synthetic surface.

TIME TO GROW: Will Take Charge ran a dismal 13th in the Kentucky Jockey Club after breaking his maiden but came back with a runner-up finish in the Remington Springboard Mile en route to victory in the Smarty Jones in January 2013. He did not mature until the summer, and his Triple Crown campaign was unremarkable.

THIS ONE'S FOR DAD: Unbridled's Song died July 26, 2013, at age 20. The following day Will Take Charge ran a narrow second in the Jim Dandy Stakes at Saratoga, an effort that would set him up for his Travers score. In six starts from the Jim Dandy to the Santa Anita Handicap, the latter his second start of 2014, he had three wins and four seconds.

BIG HORSE, BIG STRIDE: Will Take Charge stands over 17 hands high, and his stride is equally impressive — Lukas said it measures 29 feet, 4 inches. No wonder he easily runs down his rivals with that powerful closing kick.