



Horse Smarts

Karen Murdock's Lukas is a Barnyard Braniac

By Larry Bortstein

There was nothing in Just Ask Mike's three-race career—a two month blip in 1996—to indicate he would accomplish anything noteworthy, though his sire and damsire were champion California-breds.

The big chestnut was by Crystal Water, who in 1977 won the Santa Anita Handicap, Hollywood Gold Cup and Oak Tree Invitational Handicap. Pauline Revere, his dam, didn't finish in the money in six career starts, but she was by Olden Times, winner of the 1962 San Juan Capistrano Handicap at Santa Anita.

Trained by Donn Luby, Just Ask Mike never came close to graduating out of the maiden claiming ranks. As a three-year-old he was 10th, beaten 13 lengths, in a six-furlong event at Del Mar on Sept. 13, 1996.

His two other races, both at Santa Anita's fall Oak Tree meet, were equally dismal—eighth by 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ lengths at 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ furlongs on Oct. 13 and ninth by 16 lengths at a mile on Nov. 3.

If they could only see Just Ask Mike now...

Bought in 2002 for \$2,000 by Karen Murdock who responded to an ad for a 10-year-old "green project horse," he was renamed Lukas and found his niche as an equine performer.

Now 17 years old and standing 16.1 hands and weighing 1,100 pounds, Lukas has developed into "the world's smartest horse" for a repertoire of tricks that includes nodding "yes," shaking his head "no," kissing, catching, fetching, curtsying, bowing, waving, counting to five, spelling five-letter words, recognizing colors and shapes, playing hide-and-seek and smiling.

The subject of numerous videos and



articles, Lukas is being considered for a leading role in a feature-length movie, said Murdock, a Chino Hills resident who has spent 37 of her 51 years around horses, competing in dressage, jumping and barrel racing.

Lukas also will be the star of an upcoming California Thoroughbred Breeders' Association educational video, underwritten with funding from the Oak Tree Charitable Foundation.

He performed at the HITS Desert Show Circuit in Thermal in January, and is scheduled to appear at the Equine Affaire, at the Fairplex in Pomona, Feb. 4-7. His busy dance card also includes a benefit for the CTBA and TROTT (Training Racehorses off the Track), the newly-renamed Southern California division of CANTER, headed by Bonnie Adams of Laguna Hills.

"He's learned to do all his tricks on command," said Murdock, who was a psychiatric nurse for 25 years. "He smiles by putting his upper lip above his teeth and quivering. As he's gotten a little older, he's developed some arthritis in his legs, so he can't get up from a sitting position as fast as he used to, but he can still do it. He's just a marvel."

Murdock, whose husband, Doug, is an electrical engineer, spends several hours each day at the Brookside Equestrian Center in Walnut, where Lukas lives.

The horse was bred by Ed and Sharon Hudon, former California breeders in Riverside, whose best known runners were Surachai and Canyon Crest.

"We had a breeding season to Crystal Water," recalled Sharon, who with her husband now owns Sierra Farm in Lexington, Kentucky. "If Crystal Water were still alive, the success of Lukas would probably make him a hot stallion."

Murdock has embraced Lukas' role as an ambassador for off-track-Thoroughbreds, and takes pride in the



fact that he's turned into a YouTube star, and draws droves of curious fans to www.playingwithlukas.com. If Lukas can demonstrate how smart and sensitive horses are, people may be less likely to hurt them, Murdock has said.

She will soon begin working with another retired Cal-bred racer, Cee Mister B., an 8-year-old Cee's Tizzy gelding who raced 36 times in six seasons.

"I don't know how different it will be to train a horse who's just come off the track, compared to a horse like Lukas, who I started with years after his last race," Murdock pondered. "But I don't want Lukas to be known as 'the world's smartest horse' forever. There are others out there like him."

For more about Lukas, go to www.playingwithlukas.com.