



## TALKIN' HORSES

WITH

**PENNY CHENERY**

*Secretariat was the first Triple Crown winner of the television age and his stunning thirty-one-length victory in the 1973 Belmont Stakes remains one of the most incredible feats in all of sports history. His owner, Penny Chenery, considered by many the unofficial “First Lady of Racing,” was honored in 2006 with the Eclipse Award of Merit for her lifelong contributions to racing. Ms. Chenery, who took over the reins of her ailing father’s Meadow Racing stable during the development and campaign of Secretariat, has served as president of the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association and the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation for equine research. She has also been a key player in the effort to provide a dignified life for retired racehorses as a strong supporter of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation.*

► **I’m curious to know who made the decision to breed Somethingroyal to the great Bold Ruler, which resulted in Secretariat?**

— Montreal, Quebec, Canada

In the early 1960s, one of my father’s good friends in racing was Ogden Phipps, whose mother owned the great Bold Ruler. He was so popular that you couldn’t buy a season. Bull Hancock, the owner of Claiborne Farm where Bold Ruler stood, conceived of the idea that a mare be bred in two consecutive years to Bold Ruler with the proviso that the owner of the mare and Mr. Phipps flip a coin to see who got first choice of the resulting foal. This was offered to select farms and only to their choice mares. There was no dollar stud fee. You had to give up one of your foals as the stud fee. My dad and Mr. Phipps had done this at least two times before I began managing Meadow Stable. I believe we had Bold Ruler’s very first stakes winner, a filly called Syrian Sea, who was a full sister to Secretariat. So I was simply following my dad’s established pattern in sending Somethingroyal to Bold Ruler. It was a no-brainer.

- **In today's racing climate, the vast majority of breeders are in the market to sell, which is why more and more Kentucky Derby winners are auction purchases not homebreds. Given this atmosphere, how remarkable was Meadow Stable's accomplishment of winning consecutive Kentucky Derbys with homebreds Riva Ridge and Secretariat?** — Los Angeles, California

Statistically I can't respond, but my father bred horses for thirty years and raced or rode the majority of them, so we had no tradition of selling the horses that Meadow Stable raised. I think we were just a product of the times. That's what people did in the 1960s and 1970s—breed to race. It is still more satisfying to me, and I hope some day I can come close to my father's achievement in breeding horses.

- **Riva Ridge "hooked me" on racing as a seventeen-year-old the spring of 1972. Your comments, please, on his place in racing and in your heart.** — Florence, South Carolina

Riva Ridge's success as a racehorse was crucial to the continuation of my father's Meadow Stable during my father's long illness. As a racehorse, I suspect he is just one more talented classic winner. He is still first in my heart because he came through when I was faced with pressure to sell all of the horses as my father was no longer able to see and enjoy them.

- **With Riva Ridge running at the same time as Secretariat, was it hard for you not to favor one over the other?** — Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Secretariat was so handsome and charismatic that he stole all of the attention from Riva Ridge. Sentimentally, I always favored the underdog, Riva, because his earnings and achievements enabled me to keep my father's racing stable in operation longer despite Dad's growing incapacity. I loved them both, but I had a special fondness for the timid Riva, who needed my affection more than the big star Secretariat.

- **When Secretariat died, how much of an interest in him did you still actually own?** — Lexington, Kentucky

None. He was entirely owned by the syndicate; I had sold my share. I owned no fractional share, but he owned my heart.

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► **Were you contacted when Secretariat became ill with laminitis?**

— Orange, California

Secretariat's last illness was quite swift. I was not kept in daily update since I was no longer a syndicate member. But Seth Hancock did call me on the Sunday and tell me that he was very concerned over the progress of the laminitis. I learned of Secretariat's death when a reporter called me early on Tuesday morning to ask for my reaction to his death. I was, of course, shocked and could hardly believe it. All I could do was go in to the office of the Thoroughbred Racing Communications and be on the phone with racing fans who mourned him. Author Bill Nack joined us, and we did an overnight television call-in show, live television. I couldn't be alone with this terrible news.

► **I believe some people advised you early in Secretariat's career to change trainer and jockey. What made you decide to stick with them and did you ever wonder if you made the right choice?**

— Surrey, British Columbia, Canada

Well, I don't recall anyone urging me to change trainers once Lucien [Laurin] had raced Secretariat. Initially, I had not wanted to use him as I had enjoyed training with a young man, his son Roger. Although he was not my first choice, after I watched Lucien for a month I would not have entertained any suggestion to replace him. The night of Secretariat's defeat in the Wood Memorial was a bleak affair. I did blame Ronnie [Turcotte] for having ridden what I considered a complacent race, expecting stablemate Angle Light to tire and come back to him. But instead Angle Light galloped home unchallenged and we were all in confused disappointment. Much later I learned of an abscess that bothered Secretariat during the race. Actually, that defeat took some of the pressure off our camp from the press because [Secretariat] was no longer invincible. It made his subsequent victories all the sweeter.

► **[Do] you think racing needs to radically change its product to succeed long-term?** — Lexington, Kentucky

I have long felt that racing needed to market its product, i.e. competitive racehorses, in a more dramatic way that people can connect to. It's not just about the stats and more about the stories of the horses and the owners and jockeys. It's the human-to-horse connection.

- **There is little doubt that Secretariat is the greatest racehorse in American history. Do you think his world record time of 2:24 flat in the Belmont Stakes will ever be broken?** — Webster, New York

Not unless they have wings ... There are two records that Secretariat achieved that I hope and expect will never be broken: his Belmont record and his Derby record. There are brilliant horses being bred today but few of them have the bone and soundness that Secretariat possessed. That, plus his unusually large heart, enabled him to run freely to establish his speed records. He was not hampered by physical shortcomings, which allowed him to run for the joy of it in the Belmont. He also won the Man o'War Stakes on turf as he pleased and established a grass record on the turf at Belmont that I think still stands.

- **Many people have speculated about the negative effects of increasing inbreeding, which they claim has led to the diminishing quality of Thoroughbreds. Do you think there is a significant difference between today's top Thoroughbreds and those of Secretariat's and Riva Ridge's generation?** — Palo Alto, California

I definitely feel that today's Thoroughbred is more fragile than those of thirty years ago. This is partly due to the market's needs for early performance, fast two-year-old workouts at sales, for instance. In reading history from seventy-five years ago, purists bemoaned the inbreeding they saw in pedigrees. With such a limited genetic pool we may some day breed ourselves into futility, but I hope not to see it.

- **When did you get the first hint that Secretariat was someone special? What do you have to say about his performance as a stallion?**

— Tiruppur, India

Secretariat emerged as someone special in his first stakes victory. He always broke slowly. Ronnie told me he needed time to get his big rear-end in gear. So he had an added challenge of making up that lost ground. I notice that he chose different points in a race to make his move. And I always felt it was his decision, not Ronnie's, as I don't think you can urge a horse to make those explosive moves. As a stallion, Secretariat could only pass his large heart to his daughters; it's on the X chromosome. And so their performance in the stud exceeded that of his colts. His daughters were terrific broodmares.

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- **I was just a little girl glued to the television set for every race Secretariat ran. It was always thrilling to watch him loop the field and romp home. Can you please tell me what your favorite moment was with Big Red?** — Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada

I think the outstanding memory I have of Secretariat as a racehorse was when he made a great leap in the first turn of the Preakness Stakes and circled the field. This was especially important to me as Riva Ridge had been beaten in the Preakness the year before and denied a Triple Crown. After seeing how Secretariat inhaled his field, I was confident going into the Belmont, but nothing could have foreshadowed the way he did that—*that* being winning the Belmont.

- **In my early twenties I journeyed to Claiborne to see Secretariat; [it was] one of the highlights of my life. His beauty and talent were obvious to anyone who saw him, but please tell us about his personality.**

— Lubbock, Texas

Secretariat was pretty much what you saw. He was a cheerful, mischievous horse as a youngster. During his days at Claiborne, he emerged as a classic showoff. He loved all of the attention he received from the fans. He knew he was the star and sometimes would be put out when other stallions would be led out to be viewed, tossing his head and saying, "Hey, what about me?" His ears went up at the click of a camera. If he heard a camera, he would stop and put his ears up. His grooms tell me that he was feisty in a playful way, but never mean. You had to be on your toes to groom him, but it was all a game. He truly loved [groom] Eddie Sweat.