

COMMENTARY

THAT HUDSON COLUMN

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As bad as I hate to admit it, I'm not considered one of the young guys anymore.

It doesn't seem like anytime ago that I thought I was a young guy. As I have said to my good friend Butch Wise on more than one occasion in the last 10 or so years, "We've become those old farts that we used to cuss so much!"

Who could ever imagine Ben Hudson and Butch Wise on the American Quarter Horse Association's hallowed Stud Book and Registration Committee? Former AQHA president Lee Berwick and former AQHA executive secretary Ronnie Blackwell were still around years ago when Butch and I became AQHA directors. And I feel pretty sure they didn't like it.

But when Butch and I...who a lot of AQHA types considered rabble rousers back in our youth...were appointed to the Stud Book committee a couple of years ago, Mr. Berwick and Mr. Blackwell had to be spinning in their respective graves.

Long ago back when I considered myself to be young, there was a lot of talk about getting more young people involved in this business of breeding and raising and racing these American Quarter Horses.

Our friends Scoop and Bonnie Vessels some 10 or 12 years ago...heck, back when I was in my 50's maybe...started working to get school-age kids involved with the AQHA's Racing Challenge.

Those high school aged kids...mostly young women...would come to the tracks for a few days and work with trainers and see what goes on at tracks. To me, that was very inspiring.

And in the last few years, we've seen some second-generation owners, breeders and trainers step to the front. And even a couple of second-generation riders. And in some cases, we see some third generation participants beginning to appear.

It really warms my heart to see this kind of thing that we have to have if when I reach 90 here in a couple of decades I can still be watching these American Quarter Horses race.

One of the most refreshing things that I have seen in the past 20 or so years is the emergence of the young couple Micah and Leslie McKinney.

It does not seem like it, but it was five years ago when a relatively new entity named Reliance Ranches paid \$530,000 for a yearling filly by First Down Dash and out of Corona Chick at Ruidoso.

Having a degree in journalism and having watched many episodes of Law & Order, I felt the need to find out who these people were that had spent \$850,000 on three yearlings at Ruidoso that year.

A few days after that sale, I found myself a couple of hours south of TRACK Magazine's Morgan Mill, Texas, world headquarters. I was down in Llano, where that good Cooper's barbecue got started and where the McKinney family keeps their horses.

Gary and Sheila McKinney were both there, as well as Micah and Leslie and their two kids. We all jumped in the same truck and went to town for lunch. A real family affair. We visited about family and horses and no telling what else.

And then went back and looked at the horses. Nice horses. Nice people. Nice place.

I didn't sell them anything. Didn't try. Just a visit and a thank you and a welcome to the business of racing American Quarter Horses. The McKinneys knew quite a bit about horses. They knew how to rope. And they had raced a few horses.

But now they had jumped in with both feet. Gary and son Micah had decided to do this big-time, with Gary supplying the money and a little advice and Micah and Leslie doing the work and taking care of the horses and the business end of it all.

Since that September day in 2008, I have not been back to their place in Llano but once. But I do visit with the McKinneys at the sales and the races from time to time.

Many years ago one of my best friends and mentors was Jay Pumphrey, who was a former AQHA president and could have qualified to be an old fart. It's just that he wasn't. For many years, Jay's seats at Ruidoso were what I called "the best seats in racing." And I made a deal with him that when he was gone I would buy those seats.

In July 2010, I invited Gary McKinney to sit with us in those great Ruidoso seats for the Rainbow Futurity G1 trials.

That turned out to be quite a deal as Gary brought with him a guy named Jerry Hancock. Gary and Jerry worked together at Reliance Energy. While we were watching those trials for the race that Hes Too Icy For Me eventually won, a conversation about my camera with Jerry Hancock resulted in our association with Jerry's son Andy, a youthful photographer whose photos have changed the way many look at American Quarter Horses and at TRACK Magazine.

Since 2010, I have had the pleasure of being around the McKinneys more and more. We've been in the winner's circle with them a few times. We've gone to some other sporting events with them. And we've come to know them a little better.

The McKinney family has a suite in Jerry Jones World to watch Dallas Cowboy games, and we've been over there a few times. The first time we were there, Christine and Micah got to talking about foaling mares and she told him about a short course on breeding and foaling that she had taken at Colorado State. The course was just a couple of days away. And with a quick phone call to a good friend at CSU, we got Micah in the class.

Micah foals out all the mares at Reliance Ranches, and he loved this class.

About this time a year ago, I endorsed putting Micah on the AQHA Racing Committee. He serves there today.

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Last summer, with positive drug tests popping up all over the nation, Micah and Leslie decided they wanted to do something to help improve the image of racing.

They hired a young Purdue graduate named Danielle Bryan to help them, and they set about creating a program that has come to be named Racing Free.

Micah and Danielle came to see us in Morgan Mill one day last summer. We had Dan Fick, our friend from AQHA, Race Track Chaplaincy, American Assn. of Equine Practitioners and The Jockey Club, over too and the four of us massaged the Racing Free plan.

And within a matter of weeks it seems that Racing Free was handing out \$1,500 checks to people who won races after enrolling their horses in the Racing Free program.

The Reliance team turned down the corners on their catalogs (they probably actually marked some things on their iPads) on several head at the Ruidoso Select Yearling Sale last year and that team (which included more than one of the breed's all-time leading trainers) checked out the prospects.

Gary McKinney liked one of the colts a lot...but Micah and both of those big-time trainers didn't like him much.

Gary insisted on buying the colt, and he ended up paying \$290,000 for him...which was the No. 9 high-seller among the 437 head in the nation's most prestigious yearling sale.

At that sale, Reliance Ranches broke out the big checkbook and spent nearly \$1.1 million on 12 head.

Just like they do with the farm and the breeding operation,

Micah and Leslie run the racing operation. They make the decisions on the trainers, on the races they want to enter and all that kind of stuff.

On April 20, Micah and Leslie and their son Drake and their daughter Fisher were at Remington Park. Reliance's Feature Hero, who had been in the Rainbow Futurity G1 final last summer at Ruidoso, ran second in the \$252,700 Remington Park Oklahoma Bred Derby.

And on the same night, that \$290,000 yearling that Gary McKinney insisted on buying at Ruidoso last year on September 1 won the \$720,000 Remington Park Oklahoma Bred Futurity to become the nation's No. 1 money earner.

And a guy who is a generation younger than me with a kid three generations younger than me is sitting on top of the world of American Quarter Horse racing today.

In these times when we have a big trial going on in Austin and the final results of countless positive drug tests yet to be determined, it is good to see some young people who appear to be trying to do right have some success.

I wish Jay Pumphrey and Blane Schvaneveldt and Scoop Vessels and B.F. Phillips and Jerry Rheudasil and some of those guys who enjoyed the success of good, young people so much could have been there to witness this.

I am glad that I get to see it.

