

Contessa Leigh





BUCKEYE BOND: The late Chip Noble guided Contessa Leigh to many of her victories during her 2- and 3-year-old seasons, including this Ohio Breeders Championship win at Delaware last fall.

Bittersweet Diva

Champion filly helps trainer overcome loss

by Kimberly A. Rinker

Now in his fifth decade of training and driving harness horses, Marty Wollam is no stranger to what works—both on the racetrack and in the breeding shed.

The 64-year-old Ohio horseman has conditioned 1,700 winners to more than \$12.4 million in career earnings, and steered 1,087 victors to \$4.95 million in purse earnings.

For the past two seasons, Wollam's trotting filly, Contessa Leigh, has dominated the Buckeye State, receiving 2- and 3-Year-Old Trotting Filly of the Year titles in 2012 and 2013, and earning a Triple Crown each year. She scored 14 victories and earned nearly \$300,000 for Wollam and co-owners G And B Racing of New Wilmington, Pa.

But despite Contessa Leigh's triumphs, tragedy has hovered over Wollam's successes.

In 2012, his wife, Patricia, died after struggling with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). In 2013, long-time friend Chip Noble succumbed after

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battling esophageal cancer.

"Obviously, losing my wife was just such a heartbreak," said Wollam. "With Chip, I didn't know until after Delaware last fall that he was sick, when he told me about it."

Patricia Wollam had bred Contessa Leigh, who was foaled on March 14, 2010, in Baltic, Ohio.

The striking dark lass made just seven starts in 2012, racking up five wins, a second and a third, and earning \$93,616 as a freshman. She scored wins in Ohio Sire Stakes and Ohio Fair Stakes, with her best effort coming in the \$100,000 OSS final at Scioto Downs on Sept. 8, 2012, posting a freshman mark of 1:58.4.

As the fourth foal and first daughter out of the prolific broodmare Howl 3, Q2:03.4f (\$24,295), Contessa Leigh is a full sister to Count Me In 1:53.2f, a 21-race winner of \$265,791; and to Count Dracula 1:55.2z (\$68,168) and Count Home 3, 2:00.1h (\$32,678).

"We raced Contessa Leigh's dam, Howl, and her sire, Full Count," said Wollam. "Howl was a decent racemare and did OK at the fairs, but had two fractured knees, so she was never able to reach her full potential. I really like the Overcomer [Howl's sire] cross with Full Count—that's been very successful. I'll eventually use Contessa Leigh as a replacement for Howl, who is 12 now."

Driven throughout her freshman contests by Wollam, Contessa Leigh was third in her pari-mutuel debut on July 20, 2012, in a \$17,700 Ohio Sire Stakes at Scioto Downs, timed in 2:02.2.

"I was happy with her first effort," he said. "She trained down perfect and I knew she might get hot, because the Full Counts have a tendency to do that. She'd get a little strong training, but in a race she was all right."

Contessa Leigh romped to a 2:01 triumph in an \$8,500 Ohio Fair Stakes at Northfield Park on July 28, drawing off by 2¼ lengths. She followed that up with a 5½-length victory in a \$21,900 Ohio State Fair Stakes on Aug. 2 at Scioto Downs, timed in 1:59.1. Ten days later, she was second in 2:02 in a \$17,700 Ohio Sire Stakes at Raceway Park.

She won her next three starts in domi-

nant fashion. On Aug. 31 she went wire-to-wire to score in 2:00 in a \$17,000 Ohio Sire Stakes at Northfield, before taking the \$100,000 OSS final at Scioto Downs on Sept. 8, posting a career-best mark of 1:58.4 by nearly seven lengths. Her final start of 2012 came on Sept. 18 at Delaware, when she trotted to an easy, front-stepping 2:01 victory in the \$30,650 Ohio Breeders Championship by 2½ lengths.

That autumn, Wollam turned Contessa Leigh out to mature for a few months at his farm near Warren, Ohio. His wife had been fighting her illness throughout the summer, and was doing well.

"She was doctoring and everything seemed to be going in the right direction," he said. "The thing about COPD is that it doesn't heal—so it becomes a management issue. She needed to have her lung removed, but wasn't healthy enough

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Marty Wollam

yet to have that operation. But she was on the right track. Then, on a Friday, she was short of breath and we took her to the hospital and she was admitted. When I left her that evening, it seemed that everything was routine and stable, but she passed away suddenly after I left."

The date was Oct. 13, 2012.

"It was very tough," Wollam said. "One day a person is there and then suddenly, they're just gone. It's a tremendous loss."

In the spring of 2013, Wollam resumed jogging and training his coal-black filly, and had decided to turn the lines over to Noble for most of the season.

"Contessa Leigh grew and filled out in between her 2- and 3-year-old seasons, but was still pretty headstrong," said Wollam. "I was lucky to have Chip manage her all summer long. He had her under control all year. She came back as strong as she was at 2 and with a little

more stamina at 3. It's hard to keep a horse at the top of their game from May until October."

Contessa Leigh won nine races in 12 starts, adding \$199,701 to her bankroll and pushing her lifetime earnings to \$293,317 in 2013.

She won a \$30,000 Ohio Sire Stakes at Lebanon Raceway on May 3 in 1:59.4 by 19¾ lengths in wire-to-wire fashion with Noble in the sulky. A month later, she won a \$30,000 Ohio Sire Stakes at Scioto Downs in 1:57.2 by 8¼ lengths, and a \$30,000 Ohio Sire Stakes at Scioto on July 6 in 1:56.4. On July 27, she captured a \$6,100 Ohio Fair Stakes at Northfield Park in 1:58.1, drawing off by 15½ lengths with her trainer in the bike, then returned to Scioto on Aug. 1, where she won a \$60,000 Ohio State Fair Stakes in 1:57.

"In my mind, her most impressive race was at the state fair where she had the 11 hole," said Wollam. "It wasn't her fastest race, but I thought it was her best. She was the trailer, and Chip did a great job with her. She was hung way past the half and they challenged her at the end, but she stayed game."

Seven days later, Contessa Leigh won a \$19,000 Ohio Breeders Stakes in 1:57 by 5½ lengths, and on Aug. 23 triumphed in a \$35,000 Ohio Sire Stakes in 1:58.1.

"She had a couple of outstanding miles where she just exploded with speed," said Wollam. "In a couple of those races she was super strong. At the end of the season at Delaware, she was starting to get a little tired, and it was the only time I saw Chip chase her. I don't think she was as strong late as she had been earlier in the year."

Nevertheless, Contessa Leigh continued to dominate her division, scoring a 1:57.1 triumph on Sept. 7 in the \$150,000 Ohio Sire Stakes final. She followed that by winning the \$41,626 Ohio Breeders Championship at Delaware in 1:57.2 on Sept. 18 by 5¼ lengths.

"The filly's success has been great," said Wollam. "But it's bittersweet. Losing my wife and Chip made it hard to enjoy all of Contessa Leigh's awards, but that's life, and you can't change the way things go in life. The filly has been nothing short of a pleasure."

When Noble died on Jan. 13, Wollam was devastated.

"Two weeks before he died, Chip could communicate and we were able to talk," he said. "He had lost a lot of weight, but had found out the cancer hadn't spread and was optimistic. He was making plans about the upcoming year and we were talking about what we were going to do as far as racing the filly."

Wollam has soldiered on this year, bringing Contessa Leigh back into training in February after a four-month rest.

"She's good and sound and now it's just a matter of her stepping up a notch," he said. "She's never had a soundness problem, but she'll be facing tougher competition this year. Her family typically gets better as they get older, so it will be interesting to see how she'll be. She's good and chunky right now and the winter off definitely agreed with her physically."

"But I'd give all her awards, all her money, everything that she did back—I'd give all of that back just to have my wife and Chip here with us today."

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