

Riccolo



Back in Business

Homebred colt makes good for Illinois legend | by Kimberly A. Rinker

On a cold April morning in 2009, Walter Paisley leaned on his pasture fence and gazed through the early-morning mist.

Paisley was uneasy. His broodmare—Touch Of Victory—due to foal any day, hadn't come up from the field as she normally did for her breakfast.

Sighing, the veteran horseman and one-time leading Illinois reinsman made his way across the pasture at his Stockton, Ill., home. The dew was just starting to lift, and Paisley could see his mare standing in the distance, near the fence line. Beside her, on the ground in a deep mud puddle, lay her newborn foal, a giant colt who was struggling in the murky mess.

"I don't put the horses in the barn to foal; I think they should be born outside," Paisley said. "I have a lean-to where I feed the mare her breakfast and she didn't come up that morning, which isn't like her. So I walk out there and here's this foal lying in mud, and his head is stuck under the fence board."

Paisley tried to move the youngster's head and legs, but the colt was simply too heavy and the mud too dense.

CAREER SCORE: Riccolo's July 1 win in the \$34,700 Hanover Stakes in 1:54.2 at Balmoral Park was a career best, and caught the eye of Norwegian shipping executive Torkel Alendal, who bought the horse from his Illinois connections.

"He was really big and hadn't stood yet, and I wasn't able to pick him up by myself," Paisley said. "So I went back to the house, called my neighbor, and drove my Gator out where he was stuck."

Together, Paisley and his neighbor were able to free the colt from his sticky predicament.

"We finally got him up and threw him in the back of the Gator and took him to the barn," Paisley said. "He didn't put up much of a fight because I think he was pretty tired from struggling in the mud. Of course, the mare wasn't too happy with all this, and she's a good-sized horse herself."

Once inside, Paisley wiped the big foal down and soon the colt was standing and

nursing beside his dam.

"He really didn't seem to be bothered by the whole escapade," Paisley said. "He had a kind of calm assurance about himself, and was very sensible about the whole thing."

Like many precocious youngsters, Paisley said that Riccolo had that "it factor" from the start.

"Riccolo never had another mishap other than when he was born," Paisley said. "He'd just trot all the time in the field. I have a long runway beside the pas-

"I knew Riccolo had talent; it was just whether or not we'd be able to manage it."

—Walter Paisley

ture, and I'd go out there to feed and he'd just trot along beside me the whole way."

Riccolo looked so good to Paisley that he decided to nominate him to the Hambletonian as a yearling.

"It was only \$25 and I figured, 'What the heck,'" he said.

In the fall of 2010, Paisley sent his big youngster to Wisconsin horseman Robert Wand for his initial track work. Paisley said that while Riccolo seemed sensible, he was concerned the colt might have some of the fire exhibited by his half-sister (see sidebar).

"I told Bob that I didn't care if all the colt did was just walk around the track," Paisley said. "I wanted to make sure that this colt was really schooled and was calm before his training got serious."

In January 2011, Paisley took Riccolo to veteran Illinois conditioner Nelson "Spider" Willis' barn at Balmoral Park.

"I knew he had talent; it was just whether or not we'd be able to manage it," Paisley said. "Spider knew the history of the mare, and he really took his time with the colt."

Riccolo's pari-mutuel debut came on July 13, in a \$7,000 Illinois Conceived and Foaled Stakes at Balmoral. Starting from post 10 with Paisley driving, Ricco-

Paisley Comeback

IN 1993, after four decades of steering racehorses around the Windy City ovals, Walter Paisley decided to hang up his green and white colors after amassing \$34.6 million in career earnings. It was the height of his career and no one questioned his decision—Chicago trainers just knew they had lost a highly talented and much-sought-after driver.

Paisley spent his days riding horses and tending to his Illinois farm (he was even profiled in a "Where Are They Now?" story in the October 2007 *Hoof Beats*). Fast forward to 2008, when a 67-year-old Paisley re-emerged on the Illinois scene with a trotting filly named Petruccelli, a half-sister to Riccolo.

"Les Banks called me up one day out of the blue and asked me if I wanted to buy a broodmare," Paisley said.

"Well, I really didn't. But he kept pressing me and telling me how good she could have been if they could have just kept her sound."

Petruccelli's dam, Touch Of Victory, was a \$28,000 yearling purchase by Banks and partner Bruce Johnson at the 2003 Walker Standardbred Sale. They sent the daughter of Valley Victor-Spectacular Stacey-Cooper Lobell to southern Illinois horseman Ray Hanna, who broke her and trained her down.

"She got hurt in a stall accident and they weren't able to keep her sound as a 2- and 3-year-old," Paisley said. "So I finally gave in, and bought her from Les for \$1,000. I told him to drop her off at Walker's and I'd decide what to do with her."

Paisley put a call into Dr. Ken Walker, co-owner and operator—along with his wife Patricia—of Fox Valley Standardbreds in Sherman, Ill.

"I had been out of the business for 18 years, so I asked Ken to breed her to one of his stallions and he bred her to International Chip,"

he said.

The resulting foal was Petruccelli—a filly with high speed.

"I had named her after my friend Jim [Petruccelli], who lives in New Jersey," Paisley said. "She was incredibly fast and didn't want to make breaks, but just couldn't contain herself on the racetrack. She won a race at Springfield in 2:02.2 on the front end, and I could barely hold her together afterward and she nearly ran off with me going back to the winner's circle. She just wanted to explode and was very difficult, and wore herself out before every race."



Paisley

Petruccelli did earn \$13,599 for Paisley, scoring a mark of 2,2:01.2 at Hawthorne on July 22, 2008, with a 3-1-1 record from nine career starts before retiring.

Touch Of Victory's next date was with Northern Kid, a promising colt turned stallion.

"Jim [Petruccelli] had a colt he was racing out East named Northern Kid," Paisley said. "He had been one of the favorites in the 2004 [Peter] Haughton [Memorial], but made a break in that race and was never really sound after that."

Northern Kid, a son of Muscles Yankee-Swift Kid Hanover-American Winner, had won a \$20,000 Haughton prep—his first lifetime start—in 1:58.3 for driver Ray Remmen and trainer Larry Remmen at Meadowlands Racetrack, but went offstride in the \$420,000 final on Aug. 5, 2004, finishing sixth. He went on to take a career mark of 3,1:57.1 and earned \$84,367 in purses.

"Jim wanted to sell Northern Kid, and my friend Doug Riccolo was looking to buy a stallion, so he purchased the horse, and I ended up breeding Touch Of Victory to him, and the resulting foal was Riccolo," Paisley said.

lo was impeded at the start, but closed in 28.2 to finish second. One week later, the talented youngster scored his first career victory, clocked in 1:58.3 at Balmoral, drawing off by 8½ lengths.

"I let Riccolo trot down the backside a bit [to the 1:30 three-quarters]," said Paisley. "In the lane I tapped him once and he accelerated into another gear easily."

That win gave Paisley his 5,717th stroll into the winner's circle and pushed his lifetime driving earnings to \$34,682,468.

Two weeks later, Riccolo and Paisley went postward in the \$53,500 Plesac Stakes, with unfortunate results.

"He made a break in that race—the only time in his life he did so," Paisley said. "So I took him to Rood and Riddle in Lexington and found he had a slight problem with an ankle. Basically, he was too big, too fast and too young."

The rest paid off, and after 6½ months

away from the track, Riccolo was ready to begin prepping for his sophomore season. He returned on April 25, 2012, scoring a 1:58.3 victory. After that, Paisley handed the lines over to Chicago's leading driver, Marcus Miller.

"I wanted to go out with a win, and Riccolo gave me that," said Paisley.

Riccolo went on to win his next seven in a row with Miller steering him, winning a series of Illinois-bred stakes and overnight events, including the \$41,900 Cardinal Stakes at Balmoral on May 30 in 1:56.2, and a 1:55.3 score in a \$12,000 ICF Stakes at Balmoral two weeks later.

"The first time I drove Riccolo, Spider told me to keep him by himself—that he was a little anxious," Miller said. "He was a little nervous during the first part of the race, but after the half he settled down and was perfect. The next few starts he became more comfortable and learned to quiet down."

Riccolo next captured a \$12,000 ICF stakes at Balmoral on June 20 in 1:54.3, before besting some open contenders in the \$34,700 Hanover Stakes at Balmoral on July 1, clocked in a career-best 1:54.2 and pushing his career earnings to \$71,610 for his Illinois connections.

"That was his best race for me," Miller said of the Hanover. "He was first-over to a real good horse [Prayer Session] and was very tough and made sure he won.

He pretty much did it on his own."

Riccolo's Hanover win caught the eye of Norwegian shipping executive Torkel Alendal and his wife, Randi. Five days after the win, he contacted Paisley and struck a deal to buy the colt, with an eye toward the Hambletonian. Seven days later, Paisley's homebred was in a van headed for Trond Smedshammer's barn in New Jersey.

"My daughter Paige has college coming up, and I wanted no worries for her," Paisley said. "The sale of Riccolo guaranteed she could go wherever she wanted without financial worry. It was purely a business decision to sell him."

The colt won his first race for his new

owners on July 21 at Meadowlands Race-track in a \$25,000 Open with Smedshammer in the sulky, trotting wire-to-wire in 1:54.2. Disappointingly, in his \$70,000 Hambletonian elimination on July 28, Riccolo was pressed to the three-quarters in 1:25.3, before tiring and finishing sixth, dashing the Alendals' hopes of a Hambletonian victory.

"The first start I let him trot out of there and he was nice and quiet," said Smedshammer. "I wasn't prepared for how he acted in the Hambletonian elimination. He was out of his mind. He needs to train some slow miles and learn to sit in a hole because he has a tendency to get hot."

Smedshammer added that since the colt is so lightly staked, his owner is unsure what to do next with him.

"They want me to keep him around and train him and work with him for a while and decide what to do a bit later," said the trainer.

These days, Paisley still leans against his pasture fence every morning, gazing through the early-morning summer steam. Except now it's Riccolo's full brother Quaze he's watching—and dreaming about, with hopes of another fantastic future.

"Of course I would have liked to have seen [Riccolo] in the Hambletonian and I hope the horse does great for his new owners," Paisley said. "Our business is all about dreaming and having hopes for the future."

KIMBERLY A. RINKER is a freelance writer living in Illinois. | To comment on this story, e-mail us at readerforum@ustrotting.com.