



{ OPEN DIVISION }

2 0 1 1 N R H A F U T U R I T Y & A D E Q U A N ® N O R T H
A M E R I C A N A F F I L I A T E C H A M P I O N S H I P S H O W

Lil Joe Cash Cashes In

BY GAVIN EHRINGER

FAPPANI,
SALGADO
PLAY STARRING
ROLES IN AN EPIC
SPORTS DRAMA

EVEN THE BEST CREATIVE MINDS AT PIXAR, DREAMWORKS OR Disney Studios could not have dreamed up the rich stories and fairy-tale endings that played out at the 2011 NRHA Futurity. Even if they did, they couldn't fit it all in one feature—they'd have to make a movie, then a sequel. Maybe two.

Competition in the Futurity's level 4 open finals, the event's marquee evening performance, was itself straightforward: 31 horses and their professional trainers, all vying for shares of a nearly \$1 million purse. The horses earned berths in the December 2 finale based on their cumulative scores earned in two preliminary go-rounds held at Oklahoma State Fair Park in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. It was behind the scenes, however, that the story lines and the drama unfolded.

So, let's break it down, scene-by-scene, story-by-story, beginning with Andrea Fappani and the stallion Lil Joe Cash.

It begins with a used car dealer from Waco, Texas, with the improbable name of Russell Giles. A self-made business woman in her mid-40s, Giles one day decided she wanted to re-engage her adolescent interest in horse competition. Of the various sports, Reining seemed like a safe, but thrilling choice. She bought a few horses and got familiar with the sport. Then, against the advice of her riding instructor, she decided to invest a small sum in a futurity prospect that caught her eye during a horse sale.

When the gavel dropped, she'd spent a paltry \$7,700 for Lil Joe Cash (Nu Chex To Cash x RS Lilly Starlight), a seemingly unremarkable colt that the other buyers had overlooked. After a few false starts with trainers, she took the colt to NRHA Professional Brent Loseke, owner of The Colt Company, Aubrey, Texas, and a specialist in developing young horses.

"Brent realized the horse was something special, and he told me I needed to put the horse with a top trainer. He felt that Andrea Fappani would fit 'Lil Joe' best," said Giles. "I trusted his judgment completely."



JANA THOMASON

Andrea Fappani and Lil Joe Cash slid to a 227.5 to claim the NRHA Futurity level 4 open championship.



DAWN BASTROM



JANA THOMASON



JANA THOMASON



Fappani agreed to train the diamond-in-the-rough, and the pair soon began racking up earnings in futurity events. As his talent became undeniable, offers poured in to buy the three-year-old in advance of the NRHA Futurity. But Giles wouldn't sell despite the pleas of friends and "experts" in the reining horse world who didn't share her abiding faith in the horse.

Seemingly defying all odds and against the opinions of naysayers, Lil Joe advanced to the NRHA Futurity open finals with matching 223 go-round scores. The lead-off among the evening's top 31 rides, Lil Joe combined with Fappani for 227.5 points—a score that withstood the challenges of the 30 other horse and rider teams to follow. The win paid \$150,000—nearly 20 times the initial investment that Giles made in the horse. Five percent of Lil Joe's earnings—\$7,500 to be exact—went directly to Kurt and Angie Harris of Whitesboro, Texas, for their role in nominating him into the NRHA Nomination Program.

It was sweet victory for Giles, who never wavered in her faith in Lil Joe and in the guidance of Brent Loseke.

"I give so much of the credit to Brent, who saw this horse's potential and guided me through every step along the way," said Giles, who copped to the fact that this was only her third trip to the Futurity, and the first time she'd ever had a horse entered. "I honestly feel like I am the luckiest person alive."

For Fappani, winner of more than two million in NRHA earnings, it was a sweet return to the winner's circle, and one filled with cheerful coincidences. The Italian-born NRHA Professional, who trains in Scottsdale, Arizona, claimed his previous open win at the NRHA Futurity exactly 10 years before with an identical score of 227.5.

Now, add the next layer of improbability to the story. Fappani also qualified for the finals on a second horse, Spook Off Sparks (Smart Spook x Setting Off Sparks), who belongs to NRHA Hall of Fame inductee and Million Dollar Owner Arcese Quarter Horses USA—Eleuterio Arcese. Drawing 17th, the stal-

WALTENBERRY



Lil Joe Cash.



The championship duo won \$150,000, with \$7,500 going directly to Lil Joe Cash's nominators, Kurt and Angie Harris.



Fappani was interviewed for an episode of NRHA Inside Reining.

DAWN BANSTROM

WALTENBERRY

Waltenberry

lion earned 225.5 points, placing him second in the standings behind Fappani's other mount, Lil Joe.

After the top 30 horses made their runs, only the final contestant stood between Fappani and his chance to make history as the first rider ever to claim both the Futurity open championship and the reserve championship in the same year. That horse's rider turned out to be Fappani's right-hand man, Arno Honstetter, a German who crossed the pond six years ago to apprentice in the Fappani program and become one of Fappani's team.

Riding Show Me The Buckles (Wimpys Little Step x Sunset

Whiz) owned by Rebeca Martin, Honstetter rocked the house in Oklahoma City by posting a 225.5 score—tying his mentor for the open level 4 reserve championship. Afterward, the two embraced amid a circle of friends and well-wishers, and Fappani even shed tears at the shared good fortune that visited the two close friends. The payoff for the reserve title victories amounted to \$119,133 apiece.

Graciously, Honstetter did not overlook Fappani as he gave thanks for the joyous outcome.

"This is a very talented horse and my boss thought that I



Andrea Fappani and Lil Joe Cash with their supporters.

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Team Fappani

The Fappani Team, including earnings from Andrea, his wife Tish and Associate Trainer Arno Honstetter, won over \$424,000 in Oklahoma City. That kind of success takes awhile to sink in, so the *NRHA Reiner* caught up with Andrea again two weeks after the NRHA Futurity dust had settled ...

NRHA Reiner: How did you celebrate your team's success?

Andrea: "The morning after I got home I couldn't wait to get going for next year. I was out riding our two-year-olds. When I get up to ride two-year-olds early in the morning, it's the best feeling in the world. We really, truly enjoy what we do. You have to love what you're doing in order to be successful.

"After the first of the New Year, Tish and I are taking our boys—Luca and Jeremy—on a ski trip in the mountains."



JANA THOMASON

NRHA Reiner: How was this Futurity win different from your first Futurity championship in 2001 aboard RR Star?

Andrea: "The first win came as a somewhat of a surprise. After that I wanted to prove, to myself, that I could win it again. There's been a big change in me in the past couple years, especially this year. I've always done a good job preparing for the Futurity, but in the show pen I can be my biggest enemy. Sometimes, I ask too much in the show pen. I always ask 110 percent and sometimes over-do it. In the past year, I've reached a new level of maturity and confidence in my program. I work hard training at home and then let it happen in the show pen, instead of forcing it."

NRHA Reiner: How did you feel going into the NRHA Futurity open finals?

Andrea: "I knew I had the best horses, espe-

cially after posting the highest composite score with Lil Joe. Going into the finals, I just reminded myself of what I've learned over the past few years. I wanted to have a really clean run and let the capabilities of my horses and their talents take care of the rest."

NRHA Reiner: Looking back at the Futurity, what are you most proud of?

Andrea: "I'm proud that it's a reflection of our program. It shows our program is working and that we can get along with different types of horses. I'm very proud that we train horses that enjoy doing their job at such a high level of competition. It's been a great year.

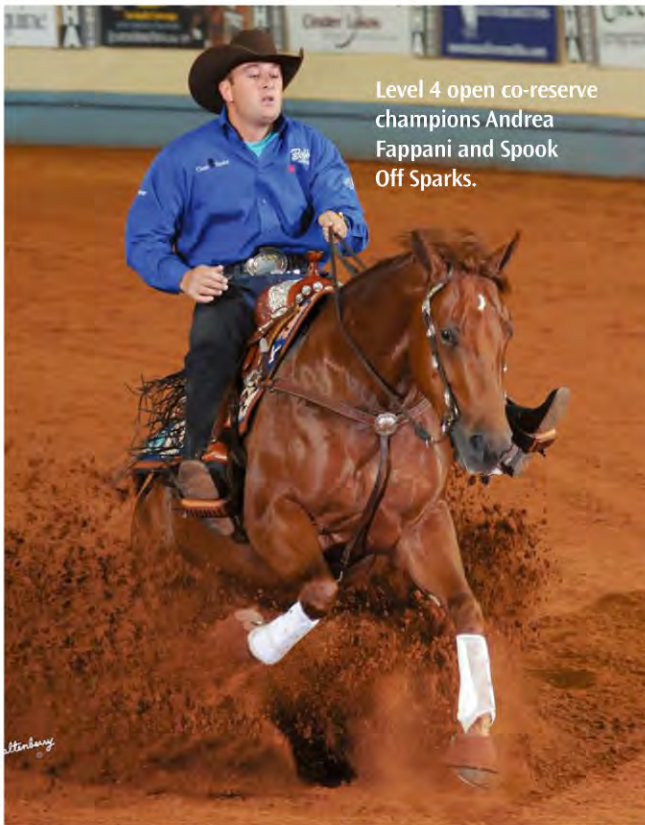
"It's all a team effort. I feel lucky to have a family behind me that supports it 100 percent. I have a really supportive wife, Tish, who understands my work ethic. She's an important part of the business. I'm also lucky to have a team of five guys who aim to help me be successful. They're really dedicated, day in and day out, to push me and get me where I want to be.

"I'd like to say thanks to the whole Fappani Team. I'm just the tip of the iceberg that everybody sees. It's everything under the water, my team who you don't always see, that really makes it happen."

Tish and Andrea shared an emotional moment at the finals.



DAWN BAASSTROM



Level 4 open co-reserve champions Andrea Fappani and Spook Off Sparks.



Level 4 open co-reserve champions Arno Honstetter and Show Me The Buckles.

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Sire & Dam
NATIONAL REINING HORSE ASSOCIATION



Nu Chex To Cash

WALTENBERG

**2011 NRHA FUTURITY
OPEN SIRE & DAM AWARDS**

LEVEL 4 OPEN DIVISION SIRE

SIRE	OWNER	AWARD
1. Nu Chex To Cash	Hilldale Farm	\$10,847.33
2. Smart Spook	Rosanne Sternberg	\$6,508.40
3. Wimpys Little Step	Xtra Quarter Horses LLC	\$4,338.93

LEVEL 3 OPEN DIVISION SIRE

SIRE	OWNER	AWARD
1. Gunner	McQuay Stables Inc.	Sire & Dam Bronze

matched him very well, so I was fortunate enough to get to ride him," said Honstetter. "I am very happy for the horse and for owner Rebeca Martin."

As Show Me The Buckles' nominator, Rebeca Martin took home \$5,957, while Rosanne Sternberg earned the same amount for nominating Spook Off Sparks.

Had the evening ended there, it would have been magical enough. But there were still several astounding sub-plots demanding conclusions, plus an encore that would bring a startling and dramatic crescendo to the evening's events.

First, though, a recap of some of the evenings' top rides. Among the top 10 finishers were a trio of reining legends whose combined earnings total nearly \$8 million—NRHA Hall of Fame inductees Tim McQuay and Shawn Florida, and perennial NRHA Futurity open finalist and NRHA Two Million Dollar Rider Craig Schmersal.

Riding 19th in the draw, Tim McQuay of Tioga, Texas, seized the number four spot in the results with a 225-score aboard Hollywood Gotta Gun, owned by Jerry Kimmel. The horse certainly presented a tour de force for McQuay. He was sired by McQuay/Easton's phenomenal stallion Hollywood Dun It, a Hall of Fame inductee and a no-longer-living legend in Reining whose offspring have toted up more than six million in earnings. Hollywood Gotta Gun's dam was the equally impressive Katie Gun, who foaled McQuay's other legendary stallion, Three Million Dollar Sire Gunner (AQHA Colonels Smoking Gun; APHA Colonels Smokingun).

The co-reserve champions celebrate with family and friends. "It's all a team effort," said Fappani.



JANA THOMASON

Arno Honstetter (left) and Show Me The Buckles' owner (right) Rebeca Martin had plenty of reasons to smile.



DAWN BAYSTROM

nominated by Cody Sapergia and owned by the Italian-based Bevilacqua Soc. Agr. ARL. Their score of 223.5 was good for \$48,456.

It was Florida's tie for seventh place that played a minor role in the evening's heart-bursting, tear-jerking subplot. The Springfield, Ohio, NRHA Professional's ride on Smart Merada Rey (Smart Shiner x Meradas Kitty Rey) seemed well-matched and amply prepared for the evening. The dark, almost cocoa-colored palomino Quarter Horse owned by Canadians Augustine, "Gus," and Gaynia Revenberg

The horsepower that carried McQuay in the finals also provided ties that bound him to the fifth-place finisher, Craig Schmersal, of Overbrook, Oklahoma, who sewed up the nickel spot with a score of 224 aboard Dunits Shining Sun, whose sire Dunit Cocky was also a Hollywood Dun It son. Out of Shining Little Peach, Dunits Shining Sun earned \$54,346 for Schmersal and the stallion's owner, KC Performance Horses LLC of Bayfield, Colorado.

Florida, who has claimed the winner's podium at the NRHA Futurity more times in the past decade than any other rider, had to console himself with two top-ten finishes in this year's finals—a phenomenal result for any trainer. The NRHA Professional earned the number six slot aboard Blue Collar Tag (Whiz N Tag Chex x Kachina Oak Olena), bred and



Shawn Florida and Blue Collar Tag receive their sixth place awards from NRHA Executive Director Dan Wall.

of Ontario, Canada, might very well have won the evening, save for a loss of momentum in Smart Merada Rey's spins. Florida attributed the deficiency in an otherwise stellar performance to simple exhaustion following two grueling early go-rounds.

"I thought he did great, but I just couldn't get him to spin right," said Florida, matter-of-factly while watching the run on instant replay.

While the audience would have been ecstatic with the performance from any other rider, they've come

to expect nothing short of magic from the sport's own Michael Jordan. This night, they found ecstasy elsewhere. In this case, it came from Brazil. Cue the next film reel.

Like many foreign-born breeders, Jefferson Abbud of Sao Paulo, Brazil, dreamed of one day taking a horse raised and trained in his home country to the NRHA Futurity finals. His dream included



Level 3 open champions Jason Vanlandingham and A Smokin Whiz.



Vanlandingham celebrates after winning the level 3 open division run-off.

DAWN BRANSTON

OPEN FINALIST OWNERS

Several owners had multiple horses in the levels 1-4 open finals:

JERRY KIMMEL (3)

HOLLYWOOD GOTTA GUN, ridden by Tim McQuay

NICASTAR LITE, ridden by James (Trey) Pool III
CHECK THIS DUALY, ridden by James (Trey) Pool III

JOHN FLETCHER (2)

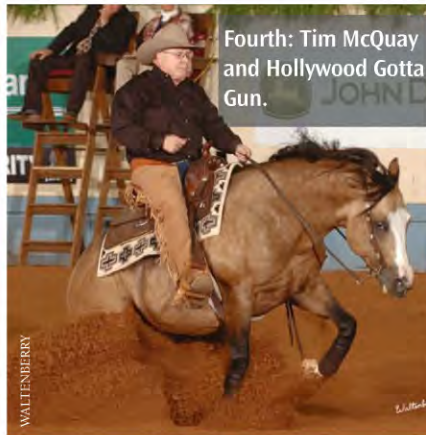
GOTTA MAGNUM DREAM, ridden by Loris Epis
RESTING WHIZ, ridden by Loris Epis

DAVID SILVA, SR (2)

Smokinhollywoodchex, ridden by Sam Schaffhauser
SHOWDOWNINTINSELTOWN, ridden by Marco Ricotta

sending one of his countrymen to perform on that native-born horse in the land of modern-day reining's birthplace, the United States of America.

Four years ago, Abbud bought a mare, Kat Jordan, and bred her to McQuay Stables' stallion Gunner. The mare was then sent to his ranch in Brazil, where she foaled Gunner Boy. Abbud put the stud colt under his head trainer, Eduardo Salgado, three-time winner of the Brazilian National Futurity and the nephew of Jango Salgado, a pioneer of the sport of Reining in the South



Fourth: Tim McQuay and Hollywood Gotta Gun.



Fifth: Craig Schmersal and Dunits Shining Sun.



Sixth: Shawn Florida and Blue Collar Tag.



Seventh Tie: Shawn Florida and Smart Merada Rey.



Tenth: Dean Brown and Conquer The Spin.

WALTENBERRY

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American country. He also nominated Gunner Boy into the NRHA Nomination Program late and paid the \$2,000 yearling fees. This would soon prove to be a great investment.

Gunner Boy was outstanding in the training pen and in early trials, so trainer and owner pointed the horse decisively toward the NRHA Futurity. But during the lengthy process of vetting the horse for international transport, the animal became sick from one of the drugs administered. At a critical point in March of 2011, the loud-colored stallion with the white-tipped tail lost more than 300 pounds. Abbud feared for the horse's very survival.

With careful ministrations the horse recovered, but a four-month period of convalescence was required. Abbud was doubtful the horse could be ready for the NRHA Futurity after such a prolonged layoff, but Salgado told him simply, "He'll be ready."

Salgado, who is from Avare, Sao Paulo, guided Gunner Boy to a berth in the Futurity finals with a composite score of 441 on two runs. When the visually-arresting horse galloped into the arena for his first run-down and sliding stop, everyone joined the South Americans in cheering the pair's performance. Gunner Boy did not disappoint.

OPEN FINALIST NOMINATOR PAYOUTS

For the first time in NRHA history, NRHA Nominator Program nominators took home five percent of the horse's earnings, regardless of whether or not they were the current owner. Here are a few nominators who took home an impressive check.

\$7,618

KURT AND ANGIE HARRIS for nominating Lil Joe Cash, ridden by Andrea Fappani and owned by Russell Giles.

\$5,990

REBECA MARTIN for nominating Show Me The Buckles, ridden by Arno Honstetter and owned by Martin.

\$4,823

JEFFERSON ABBUD from Brazil for nominating Gunner Boy, ridden by Eduardo Salgado

\$2,388

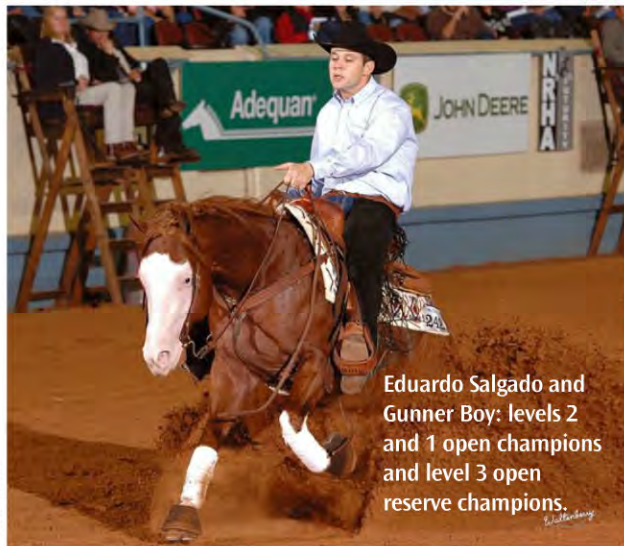
ERNIE RODINA for nominating Self Wrighteous, ridden by Todd Wright and owned by Rodina.



Todd Crawford and Cash Rooster won the Prime Time open championship.



Levels 1 and 2 open reserve champions Loris Epis and Resting Whiz.



Eduardo Salgado and Gunner Boy: levels 2 and 1 open champions and level 3 open reserve champions.



Salgado and Gunner Boy proudly wore the Brazilian flag during the awards ceremony.

WALTENBERRY

WALTENBERRY

WALTENBERRY

DAWN BAXSTROM

OPEN FINALIST SIRES

Several sires were represented by three or more offspring in the levels 1-4 open finals:

GUNNER (7): OWNED BY MCQUAY STABLES, INC.

SMOKINHOLLYWOODCHEX, ridden by Sam Schaffhauser, owned by David Silva, Sr.

SMOKIN SOMETHING, ridden by Troy Heikes, owned by Amy Potts

CHICKS SMOKINGUN, ridden by Nathan Piper, owned by Mark Bradford

HF MOBSTER, ridden by Jordan Larson, owned by Heritage Farms

KR IMA GUNNER, ridden by Patrick Flaherty, owned by Cottonwood Ranch

GUNNER BOY, ridden by Eduardo Salgado, owned by Jefferson Abbud

SHOWDOWNINTINSELTOWN, ridden by Marco Ricotta, owned by David Silva, Sr.

CONQUISTADOR WHIZ: (4) OWNED BY SILVER SPURS EQUINE

CONQUER THE SPIN, ridden by Dean Brown, owned by Robert Santagata

CACHE OF JEWELS, ridden by Dell Hendricks, owned by James Crews

ONE MIGHTY APHRODITE, ridden by Peter Defreitas, owned by Double Run Farm

SKEETS CONQUISTADOR, ridden by Jay Dee Anderson, owned by Janis & Jay Dee Anderson

WIMPYS LITTLE STEP (4): OWNED BY XTRA QUARTER HORSES, LLC

A LITTLE FLASH O FLY, ridden by Nathan Piper, owned by Kelly Hale

CFR CENTENARIO WIMPY, ridden by Jordan Larson, owned by Claudio Ramon

SHOW ME THE BUCKLES, ridden by Arno Honstetter, owned by Rebeca Martin

A NIMBLE WIMP, ridden by Jarvis Anderson, owned by Rodney Westrum

EASY OTIE WHIZ: (3) OWNED BY BOBBIE COOK & OUTWEST STALLION STATION

EASY LIL LADY, ridden by Michael Boyle, owned by Darling 888 Ranch

IMA EASY WHIZ, ridden by Matthew Hudson, owned by Equine Plus

EASY OKIE WHIZ, ridden by Brent Naylor, owned by Alain Longatte

HANG TEN SURPRIZE (3): OWNED BY MANNTANA, LLC

HANG TEN JEN, ridden by Rocky Dare, owned by Irvin Ware

TEN REASONS, ridden by Jesse Beckley, owned by George McIvor

HARLEY SURPRIZE LENA, ridden by Michael McEntire, owned by The Harley Partnership

SMART CHIC OLENA (3): OWNED BY JIM BABCOCK

LOADSTONE, ridden by Stefano Calcagnini, owned by Robert Thompson

CHICS CATTIN PEPTO, ridden by Trevor Elliott Dare, owned by Foundation of Christian Upreach Services

CHIC WITH GUNS, ridden by Ryan Rushing, owned by Jennifer Kersey

TOPSAIL WHIZ (3): OWNED BY BOB LOOMIS REINING HORSES

RESTING WHIZ, ridden by Loris Epis, owned by John Fletcher

WHIZZEN SHINE, ridden by Tom McCutcheon, owned by Jimmy Pierce

A SMOKIN WHIZ, ridden by Jason Vanlandingham, owned by Sunrise Ranch, LLC

Salgado and Gunner Boy performed as though their very existence depended on the run and were rewarded by the judges with a score of 223, matching the mark of Florida and Smart Merada Rey. Salgado, who had never competed in the U.S. and speaks little English, immediately vaulted to the top of the leader board in three of the four open divisions. The score, of course, would result in the tie for seventh place in the level 4 open division.

But then came the encore. Earlier in the day, 31 horses had competed for titles in the levels 1, 2, and 3 open divisions. One of those riders, Jason Vanlandingham of Whitesboro, Texas, had also earned a score of 223 points on A Smokin Whiz (Topsail Whiz x PF Nu Miss Royal Rsk) owned by his longtime client Sunrise Ranch, LLC.

In order to settle the level 3 open title, officials declared a run-



Eduardo Salgado and Gunner Boy greeted fans after the run-off.

DAWN BAKSTROM

OPEN FINALIST NOMINATORS

Several nominators had three or more horses in the finals:

JERRY KIMMEL (5), \$6,241

TOPSAIL GOTTA GUN, ridden by Jason Vanlandingham, owned by Donna Strating

HOLLYWOOD GOTTA GUN, ridden by Tim McQuay, owned by Jerry Kimmel

NICASTAR LITE, ridden by James (Trey) Pool III, owned by Jerry Kimmel

CHECK THIS DUALY, ridden by James (Trey) Pool III, owned by Jerry Kimmel

GOTTA MAGNUM DREAM, ridden by Loris Epis, owned by John Fletcher

DOUBLE RUN FARM (3), \$2,700

THE CATS RIGHT SMART, ridden by Brenda Thomison, owned by Allen Mitchels

ONE MIGHTY APHRODITE, ridden by Peter Defreitas, owned by Double Run Farm

RELATIVELY SWEET, ridden by Ruben Vandorp, owned by Jackspar Enterprises, LLC

CAROL ROSE (3), \$3,589

GUAPO LENA, ridden by Jay McLaughlin, owned by Carol Rose

SMART MERADA REY, ridden by Shawn Florida, owned by Gaynia & Augustine Revenberg

SHARP DRESSED SHINER, ridden by Jay McLaughlin, owned by LaMesa Performance Horses, LLC

off. Vanlandingham, who had missed the cutoff for the level 4 open finals by a mere half-point, had ached for the chance to show in front of the evening crowd. Earlier in the day, he had said of A Smokin Whiz, "When he came out of the arena, he lowered his head and it felt like he was telling me that he was ready to do it again."

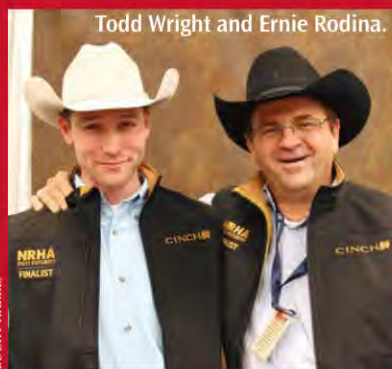
Suddenly, both horse and rider had their chance. It would not go to waste.

In a crowd-stirring exhibition of showmanship, the duo upped the ante from their morning's ride, racing through Pattern 10 at break-neck speeds that threatened peril on the fresh arena

surface. In the end, the judges voted their appreciation with a score of 226, fully three points higher than they had been awarded for their morning run. Win or lose, Vanlandingham had made a statement about the horse and about his own ability to display gutsy confidence under pressure.

Next came the Brazilian, whose horse had barely had a chance to catch its breath after his earlier exertion. Abbud said he was worried about the burden of another exhausting run, but to no avail.

Despite his owner's concerns, the Brazilian-born horse rose to the occasion, giving the audience one more over-the-top thrill.



BUCKY HARRIS

Todd Wright and Ernie Rodina.

Kansas Couple to First-Ever NRHA Futurity Finale

Wright, made the cut to compete on Saturday. "I realize there are people who work for years to reach this level," said Rodina of Ottawa, Kansas. "My wife, Connie, and I have to pinch ourselves that we're here."

The Rodina's Cinderella story didn't happen overnight, however. Ernie began working for Purina Mills more than 30 years ago. Among his first clients was NRHA Professional Brent Wright, who was then a farmer pursuing a dream of becoming a big-time NRHA competitor. Because the Wright's ranch was miles from his home, the sales rep would sometimes spend the night there during his sale swings through eastern Kansas. Wright and Rodina quickly became fast friends.

Fast forward three decades, and Rodina found himself negotiating a bill with David and Philip Solum, sales reps for NRHA Corporate Partner Bob's Saddles. In lieu of payment, the Solum's traded a breeding to the stallion Self Shine by Three Million Dollar Sire Shining Spark, and helped Rodina find a broodmare, Im A Wright Off.

"I didn't tell my wife immediately that we were in the horse-breeding business," said Ernie, "but Connie does Brent's wife's hair. So when Jan (Wright) told Connie, I had to think quickly. I told her that the mare was her Valentine's Day present."

And what a gift that's turned out to be. After starting the gelding, Brent decided that the horse might fit well in his son Todd's training barn. With the young trainer, the Wrights decided, the gelding would have a better chance at the Futurity, as Todd, an NRHA Professional, competes in level 1 open, making him eligible in all four open divisions, giving the pair four chances to win a title.

The horse was sent to Todd's training facility in Newcastle, Oklahoma, a move that left Ernie and Connie with no small heartache.

"We raised the horse here. From the begin-

ning, he had a special presence. He looked and acted like an athlete," said Ernie. "It hurt to send him off to Todd's, as we had gotten used to being able to see him every day. But I knew he was in the right hands."

The strategy paid off. After winning the Kansas Reining Horse Association Sunflower Slide Futurity levels 4 and 2 open championships in September, the dun gelding nicknamed "Ernie" seemed well-tuned for his appearance at the NRHA Futurity. Todd and Self Wrichteous earned a 220 in the first go-round and a 215.5 in round two for a composite score of 435.5—just enough to earn a top 30 berth in the Futurity's open finals.

"I was worried after the second go-round, because I knew we were on the bubble," said Todd. "But when it turned out we'd made the cut, I was happy and relieved."

"It's nice to get here with this horse. My family has been friends with Ernie all my life. He's done a lot to promote dad's program and now mine. So I am glad we could do this together."

In the end, the Rodinas didn't get to accompany Todd and Self Wrichteous to the winner's circle—that honor went to another first-timer at the Futurity, Russell Gates, a lady car dealer from Waco, Texas. Still, for Ernie and Connie, it was a night of champagne celebration.

Said Connie of the whole experience, "It's the



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Todd Wright and Self Wrichteous were finalists in all four open levels of the NRHA Futurity.



DAWN BANSTROM

When Salgado and Gunner Boy skated down the arena in their final sliding stop, the audience rose to its feet in a show of support and admiration. The judges marked the ride 225.5, just a half-point less than they had given Vanlandingham and A Smokin Whiz.

The disappointment on Salgado's face lasted only a moment before he embraced Gunner Boy in a touching display of affection and gratitude.

Vanlandingham had captured a well-deserved level 3 open championship and \$31,184. But the Oklahoma City crowd treated the two riders as equal victors, awarding the two their hearts, applause, and cheers.

As Salgado exited the arena and headed for the warm-up pen, a crowd of Brazilians swarming around him, Vanlandingham strode up with a smile on his face and wrapped the foreign-born rider in a bear hug. Despite the language barrier, the respect the two men shared required no words.

Because he came to Oklahoma City with only \$177 in NRHA

Lifetime Earnings, Salgado was eligible for titles in all four open divisions. His final's ride on Gunner Boy placed him in the No. 1 spot in the level 1 and level 2 open divisions, unseating another foreign-born rider, Loris Epis of St. George, Ontario. Overall, Salgado earned \$92,847 and took home his first two Lawson Bronzes, two trophy saddles from Bob's Custom Saddles, multiple Montana Silversmiths trophy buckles and a variety of prizes from other NRHA Corporate Partners. As the nominator, \$4,642 of the earnings went to Abbud, more than doubling his yearling nomination investment.

In the morning's competition, which was populated with riders from the levels 1, 2, and 3 open divisions, Epis had taken a decisive lead with 220 points aboard the mare Resting Whiz (Topsail Whiz x Forget The Rest) owned by John and Sharon Fletcher. In yet another head-spinning plot-twister, the only rider in the evening finals who was also qualified to post scores in the the levels 1 and 2 open divisions was Salgado. Unfortunately for Epis, the momentum of the Brazilian rider's historic efforts swept Epis from the frontrunner position he'd held going into the evening.

But the Italian-born Epis, who wasn't raised with horses, didn't begin riding until age 21, and had only ridden horseback for a total of nine years, took great pride in earning the levels 1 and 2 open reserve championships and \$21,404.

Also ecstatic about his level 1 and 2 open reserve championships was Wagman Ranch (Marc and Tamra Wagman) of Talala, Oklahoma, who nominated Resting Whiz and earned over \$1,000 for his Futurity finals finishes.

"I showed here twice before, but never made the finals," said Epis. "Everyone hopes to win the [NRHA] Futurity. But I think if you keep working hard and trying, it all works out. The good things will come."

As an Italian, of course, Epis felt hugely proud and gratified to see Fappani enjoy the glories of the evening. He says one of the greatest benefits of this year's pursuit of a Futurity title was simply befriending Fappani and gaining his confidence and friendship.

"I met Andrea a year ago. Being Italian and working in this business gave us an immediate connection. Anytime I get stuck or something, I call on Andrea.

"In fact, just three weeks before the Futurity, I called him and said, 'Andrea, I have no rollbacks! What should I do?' And he gave me some exercises to work on. So you can say that he played a role in my success here," said Epis.

Smiling throughout the awards presentation and happy to be among the legends of the sport as he was called out to accept his reserve championship awards, Epis seemed to bask in the great stories and epic conclusions that took place on a night that even Hollywood could not have scripted.

One hopes in some soon-to-be produced "Futurity" sequel, the swarthy Italian cowboy will be cast in his own starring role. ♦



Loris Epis and Resting Whiz received two rose wreaths for earning the levels 2 and 1 open reserve championships.

DAWN BAXSTROM