

TDN Q & A

At 81, D. Wayne Lukas is in the final chapter of his career, still energetic, driven and proud that he can work a 25-year-old into the ground. Will there be another GI Kentucky Derby winner for him, a last hurrah, and what would he like his legacy to be once his career is over? How does he feel about his mentee Todd Pletcher's own superstardom and the notion that he will eventually break many of Lukas's records? Have top owners given up on him because of his age? Those were among the questions Bill Finley asked Wayne Lukas last week on the Churchill Downs backstretch.



D Wayne Lukas | *A Coglianese*

TDN: When you made the switch from Quarter Horse Racing in the late seventies did you have any idea that you would have the level of success you ultimately achieved?

WL: No, not really, but I thought we'd win races. But I don't think anybody could have imagined we were going to do some of the things we were able to do. I found this interesting: it took about two or three years for us to overcome the Quarter Horse image and, even, actually, to overcome the basketball coach image. We're going along and we started winning pretty regularly right there in the first couple of years when we came over. It wasn't all warm and fuzzy with everybody on the backside. Everybody said, 'He's just a Quarter Horse guy.' There were three guys who accepted me for who I was and did so openly. They were Laz Barrera, Charlie Whittingham and Bob Wheeler, all Hall of Famers. They were comfortable in their careers and very secure. I'd go through the box seat section and some of the young guys didn't hardly speak to me.

But those three guys, Laz, Charlie and Wheeler, would say, 'Hey, sit down, cowboy,' and we'd visit. It was a transition, but as we started to win, I think we gained some respect. I remember one quote. Henry Moreno, who had been there forever, they asked him, 'What about the Quarter Horse guy?' and he said, 'We're all going to have to get up a little bit earlier in the morning from now on.'

TDN: You must get this question all the time, but I have to ask: the best horse you ever trained?

WL: That does come up all the time. You go through different eras and different time frames and you tend to find one for each era. Each of them had a certain quality. For instance, Landaluce had the most brilliant speed of any horse I ever trained. For consistency, you probably have to point to either Lady's Secret or Serena's Song. I was looking at Serena's Song's records just the other day. She was fourth in her first two outs. She had 38 outs, so you take those two off and now you're down to 36 and she runs one-two in 32 out of the 36. And they're all stakes. That's unbelievable. You don't hear of that anymore. Winning Colors, our first Derby winner...very special. They're all pretty special within their own time frame. I was telling some people the other day about Thunder Gulch. If you tried to do now what I did with Thunder Gulch these days you'd get criticized pretty severely. We went Fountain of Youth, Florida Derby, Blue Grass, Kentucky Derby, Preakness, Belmont. Then we go up to the Swaps, come back and win the Travers. You throw that schedule out to somebody now and they're going to say it can't be done.

TDN: Is there a horse that you are most proud of, in so far as you believe that horse never would have been a top horse in anyone else's program?

WL: Without a doubt. Tabasco Cat. Put aside that he was the one who ended Jeff's career. He was tough. He was a difficult horse. He wins the Preakness, he wins the Belmont, we had a helluva shot at the Kentucky Derby, but the horse next to him threw a fit. That horse was a complete challenge every day. Some of the great trainers, like MacK Miller and others, would watch what I did with him. I got a beautiful letter from MacK, who said, 'I watched what you did with that horse prior to the Belmont and I'm going to tell you you did a great job. What a challenge that horse was.' He tried you every single day and you never really got comfortable with him. Even saddling him before a big race was a problem. I think that was my best job and I did it for two of my dear friends, David Reynolds and Bill Young.

TDN: Next year is the 30th anniversary of your first Derby win, with Winning Colors. What memories will that bring back?

WL: The first time we ever ran in a Classic was in 1980 when we ran Codex in the Preakness and beat Genuine Risk. I thought at the time, this isn't going to be that difficult. The next year, we ran in the Derby and we were third with, literally, an allowance horse (Partez).

We think we're going to win some of these and then you go eight years from 1980 to 1988 without winning and you realize the difficulty of it. To me, that was so special because I



Lukas and Winning Colors | Horsephotos

bought her and I owned part of her with Gene Klein. The whole thing just came together so beautifully. To do it with a filly...if I had won it in '88 with a colt it would have been significant, but to do it with a filly, which had only been done twice, was really special.

TDN: Let's go back to the 1980 Preakness. Here you had just pulled off a huge victory and you, and, more so, Angel Cordero Jr., were cast as villains because of the way the race unfolded and because you beat America's sweetheart. Did that spoil the joy of winning?

WL: Half of the population in America is female, so they were pulling for Genuine Risk. Already, 50% of the people were against us before we even got to the gate. I've talked to Cordero a lot over the years. We felt that Jacinto [Vasquez] on Genuine Risk did not want to bring her up the inside. I've never discussed this with Leroy Jolley, but we always thought that was part of her MO, that she did not want to go inside. So Cordero was determined to give Jacinto the inside. He gave him a little bit, a little bit more, a little bit more and just begged him to go inside. Jacinto wasn't going to have any part of that. He kept going wider and wider. That aggravated the whole thing and it was very controversial. I remember winning it, thinking 'this is special, you just don't win the Preakness the first couple of years that you are training.' I remember going through the stable gate Sunday morning. It was kind of rainy, drizzly, cold. The gate guy stopped me and said he had a bag full of mail here for me, a lot of telegrams had come in. I'm thinking, this is super. So he gives me this bag and I go to the tack room and Joe Hirsch came in and sat down. I said, 'Joe, look at this here, look at all the telegrams I got.'

I started opening them, they were running about five to one hate mail. I couldn't believe it. Here I win this big race and all of America is really taking shots at me. Nonetheless, I thought it was a real accomplishment. John Nerud sent me that horse. They couldn't train him down in Ocala. John said, 'Give him to the cowboy.' We won the Hollywood Derby and then the Santa Anita Derby. The problem was they hadn't nominated him to the Kentucky Derby.

TDN: There were a lot of great trainers around when you got started but, in terms of achievements, you quickly surpassed all of them. You took things to a whole new level. How? Why?

WL: At that time in racing, the practice was, even the top trainers, would have 25-30 horses and would be stabled in just one place. They'd be at Santa Anita, Hollywood, Belmont or wherever they were located and just take care of what was sitting in front of them. I had the mindset that in order to keep my clientele really happy, I had to realize that not all of my horses were at the top level. Not everyone can play in the major leagues; some guys go to Triple A. Not all of our horses are going to fit at Santa Anita. I told Jeff, what we need to do is to try to make every horse useful. I decided to get some in different leagues. We'll put 12-14 in Omaha, 20 at Monmouth Park, and so forth. Suddenly, we're all across the country. There would be times when a horse would surprise us and get really good. Kieran McLaughlin calls me from Monmouth and says I got this filly Open Mind, she just won easily today, send her to Belmont right away. That's how it worked. We started shuffling them around. We tried to make every horse profitable and our clientele got really behind us on that. They said we may have given too much or too little for one, but we're all going to make them pay their way. That overall policy really helped us through '80s, '90s, through the 2000s.



Sunrise at Saratoga | Sarah K Andrew

TDN: One of your “students,” Todd Pletcher, appears on his way to breaking many of your records. When they ask someone 50 years from now who was the most successful trainer of all time, I’m not sure if the answer will be Wayne Lukas or Todd Pletcher? If they say “Pletcher,” how would that make you feel?

WL: If it is one of my guys, I’ll feel pretty good about it. I don’t do jealousy. I don’t do resentment. I’ll tell you an interesting story. Just this last year I started winning races at Oaklawn Park and the announcer, Vic Stauffer, every time we won a race, he said ‘and Hall of Fame trainer D. Wayne Lukas,’ when we were in the winner’s circle. I went to him and told him, ‘I don’t want you to do that anymore. Quit that.’ He said ‘What are you talking about?’ I said, ‘Don’t do it. I’ve spent 30-40 years trying to be one of the guys and blend in and be just another guy, don’t flaunt that.’ My colleagues, they know who is in the Hall of Fame. They know I’m in. I think he was a little offended by it, but he stopped. The thing about it, some of our records will be broken. Todd will break most of them. Chad Brown may break some of them. It doesn’t matter because I’m all for them. I know how difficult it is. LeBron James is after Michael Jordan and that’s what people like to argue about right now, who’s better? In sports, that’s part of it. Winning six Triple Crowns races in a row, that one might stand. But Todd’s on a runaway course to probably surpass anything I did. But, again, he’s family.



Pletcher and Lukas | *Horsephotos*

TDN: From the first day, a young fresh-faced Todd Pletcher showed up at your barn did you know he’d be special?

WL: I thought he had a chance to be special. First of all, he came from a good horse background. His dad, J.J. Pletcher, and I were friends for years. I don’t know that he had the direction, intensity and focus at first that he developed.

But eventually I could see that he had a great work ethic and he bonded with Jeff. Jeff also had the same characteristics. Jeff and Todd were like brothers, were hand in hand with that intensity, no-nonsense-get-it-done attitude. I always thought Todd had a great chance. Every one of those guys who came through our program was blessed with taking a major client when they left, with my blessing. Mark Hennig took Team Valor. Mike Maker took Ramsey. Todd took Tabor and Magnier. That helped them a lot. I always thought those guys who have turned out to be so successful were going to be successful. They all left with my blessing.



Jeff & Wayne Lukas | *Horsephotos*

TDN: Drugs are a hot-button issue in racing today, be it race-day medication or illegal drugs. Your thoughts?

WL: I think we’re better than we were, especially from the steroid standpoint. One of the most damaging things I think you could possibly throw out there in the Thoroughbred industry is when you are talking to a client and he feels that he’s not playing on a level playing field. If you are competing and putting up millions of dollars, or any amount of money, and when you go over there in a 10-horse field and six of them are enhanced and you’re one of the four who is not, that is a huge problem. That is damaging. That is a hard sell if you are trying to influence someone to be in the horse business. We have a certain amount of image to overcome. We certainly have a problem we have to address. We talk about it all the time. It’s not an easy problem. But I think it’s got to get better and I don’t think we’re there yet.

TDN: Have you ever been in a race where you thought five or six guys are cheating and I'm never going to beat them?

WL: You never know. First time a guy starts to win at a high percentage, everybody says he's found something, he's got something working for him. I've been through that. I think everybody has. Todd probably has, too. There's always that rumor mill on the backside. I don't know that I would ever take that position. I might see things as sort of a gray area and think this horse sure is running a lot better, especially if he has past form and then suddenly reverses it. I might say something is not right here. I'm probably of the school that believes we're doing all we can and it will run its course and it will get to those guys eventually.



1995 GI Haskell winner Serena's Song

Equi-Photo

TDN: With so much medication out there and with vets playing such a huge role in racing, is horsemanship a lost art? I know Jack Van Berg believes that it is.

WL: I think with the hands-on horsemanship, yes, there is a certain amount to that when you say it's not the same as it was. We are very proud of how low our vets bills are. Our vet would starve to death if he just had our barn. A lot of the young trainers just turn it over to the vet. They say 'this horse is not doing right, fix it' and turn it over to the vets. With the new laws, the new rules we're working with, the injections and all of that are being curtailed a lot. So I think we're headed in the right direction there. But I agree, I don't think there's as much hands-on horsemanship as there used to be.

TDN: You were always an advocate of changing the structure of the Triple Crown. Still feel that way?

WL: I would change the Triple Crown series. I wouldn't change the Derby. I would run the Preakness on Memorial Day, stretch things out a bit.

I would run the Belmont on the 4th of July and I would run the Travers on Labor Day and make it a four-race series. I think that would hold things together a lot better. Those would be, in effect, four holidays...make those weekends spectacular. June 10 is a nice date next week and they're going to run some great races and they'll get a big crowd at Belmont, but if it were on the 4th of July you might be surprised how many people would be there.

TDN: American Pharoah didn't change your mind? Though it took 37 years, he proved winning a Triple Crown is doable.

WL: I always said if you get a great horse it will happen and it did. The Triple Crown is our showcase, along with the Breeders' Cup. The problem is we need to keep the stars and the fields together. The way we do that is by more spacing between these races and maybe even changing the distances a little bit. It's not a three-race Triple Crown anymore. Because of the point system and everyone wanting to be in the Derby, those races prior, those 100-point races right before, are tough. You take the Wood, the Santa Anita Derby the Arkansas Derby, the Florida Derby, you don't go in there and just waltz around the track like Calumet did in the forties and fifties and then say, 'ok, now we'll run in the Derby.' You go to the well. You've already been in a Triple Crown series when you get to Kentucky. Then you have to bounce back two weeks later. It's impossible for economic reasons to keep them on the track beyond their 3-year-old year if they are great. The breeding shed is going to get them. But we can damn sure keep them for a year and keep them running against one another. That would happen if you moved the Preakness to Memorial Day.

TDN: You're 81, but, both physically and mentally, you act and look like someone who is 31. How do you do it?

WL: Better than 31. I've got some guys here who are 25 and they can't keep up with me. I work them into the ground. It's all about having that inner passion. If you are in racing you are usually around exciting young optimistic people. That gives you a great outlook on life. Every single day, I get up at 3:30 a.m, no matter where I am. The alarm goes off and I get to the barn by 4. I really don't want to sit around and, as I said to my wife, lead a normal life. I want to be out here. I want to be part of this. I love the competition. I love the fact that here I am at 81 and I think I'm in the Derby next year. My 2-year-olds are excellent, so right away I am already planning for next year's Derby. I think that's what gives you the energy and vitality to get up and go. I like being around the whole game. These are some wonderful people you can rub elbows with in this industry

TDN: God willing, will you still be doing this at, say, 91?

WL: I would think so, as long as I can keep my mental capacity. I don't have any health problems at this point at all. I don't know why I wouldn't do it. I don't wake up any morning and say to myself I'm tired, I don't want to do this anymore. I pretty much look forward to it. A win or two and I really look forward to it. The other day I was kidding my wife Laurie. I worked a 2-year-old here that I really like and she asked me what I thought. My answer: "So, Mr. Lukas, how does it feel, at age 82, to have just won your fifth Kentucky Derby?"

TDN: I wouldn't say you are struggling, but the Wayne Lukas stable of 2017 is a far cry from the Wayne Lukas stable of 1987. It's not just you, many Hall of Fame trainers have had trouble getting owners and filling their barns when they get into their 70s and 80s. Is this fair?

WL: It doesn't bother me much. There is no how-to book, there's nowhere to go to in the library and look up on the Internet where it says this is how you train the Kentucky Derby winner. It is experience, the absolute paramount ingredient in training the horse. I have seen every different situation there is to see. It would be like if you hire a football coach. You can always get a nice young energetic man and then if you say, 'How many games did you win at the junior college level?' he'll say, 'I didn't win very many.' I'm really energetic. I feel good, I know the game. If I'm hiring that football coach I'm not hiring the young junior college guy, I'm going to hire someone who has won four national championships. That's where we're at. I think the perception is that the older trainers don't have the energy, we don't have the intensity. That may be the case with someone else. It's not with my case.

TDN: You're not getting the owners you need to give you top horses. You sat out this year's Triple Crown. For someone who has accomplished all that you have, is that a blow to your pride?



Lukas and GI Preakness winner Oxbow | Reed Palmer

WL: It doesn't hurt my pride, but there is a void. I stood there and watched this year's Derby. I was emotional and I was a cheerleader when Todd's horse turned for home at the quarter-pole. I think I cheered harder than I would have if it had been my own horse. Having said that, I've always done well if we get into the yearling market. The thing that made us tick was Bob French, Bob Lewis, Bill Young, having that financial base to buy the talent we thought was good. We did that a little bit last year. We got into a little bit better horse. I am an eternal optimist. I look down there and see three or four of those things that are pretty good. We bought horses that we really liked and, last year, for this first time in a while, were able to buy them. For a couple of years when we weren't in the Derbies, it was because we weren't able to buy the horses at the sales that I liked the best.

TDN: If you didn't become a horse trainer you were, clearly, going to be a basketball coach. Do you ever think, what if? What might have you achieved if you went into that field instead of racing?

WL: That's very interesting that you brought that up. This week on HBO they did a documentary called 'Perfect in 76.' It's Indiana's perfect season. I was talking to Bobby [Knight] this week. I saw it and I had to call him. When they did that and when they played the national champion, it was Michigan-Indiana. When I watched the documentary, I got emotional because Bobby comes down and Johnny Orr at Michigan comes up and they hug and shake hands. I told Bobby that if I took the assistant's job at Michigan when Johnny Orr offered it to me, I would have been standing right next to him and Johnny at that game. I had already been training full time for two years. But I agonized over it, switching back to basketball. I thought this is a helluva an opportunity. Johnny Orr left Michigan for Iowa State in 1980. With my friendship with Bo Schembechler, many times I think back and think I would have been the head coach at Michigan. I feel in my heart that I would have been. This game and coaching have so many similarities and you just can't get away from it. They draw you and it's seductive and they just keep pulling at you.



Lukas and Will Take Charge | Steve Sherack

TDN: That's the first time I've heard that story. I never knew you had risen that far in the coaching ranks.

WL: I was on the staff at Wisconsin with Johnny Orr and John Erickson. I worked with the freshman team and all three of us were close. Johnny and I became real close. Johnny, I think, liked what he saw in me. I was a terrible athlete. But I studied the game. He left and I went into coaching high school. I had invented a basketball shoe that was weighted, a training shoe. I patented it. I did my master's thesis on it. When I got my master's, I came into the locker room to get dressed for practice and Johnny said 'how did your master's orals go?' and I said 'great, they really liked my deal. I've got this shoe and I've been working the freshmen team with it.' Johnny got interested in it. He said that he knew people at Converse and thought they'd be interested in it. He gets us a meeting with Converse. I told him I'd cut him in for half if we got it sold. So we go down there, no lawyer, no representation, I'm in my early twenties, and we sit in there with those high-powered lawyers and they love the shoe. They buy the patent. We got out in the hall, they offer us \$10,000 a piece. This is 1960. I said Johnny, that seems like all the money in the world. He said, 'Yeah, let's go in there and sign up. We got royalties, too. I think we got 10 cents for the first 20,000 pairs and then a nickel for the next 50,000. We were so naive. We had no idea the vastness of Converse. We sign off on deal. They called it the Blue Toe Trainer by Converse Rubber and they marketed it. Our royalties ran out in like four weeks and we were out of business. We were close friends and when he got the Michigan job he said to me, 'we'll get you recruiting in the Detroit area and we'll kill 'em.' I often wonder what would have happened if I had taken that job.

TDN: What would you like your last hurrah to be? Winning another Derby, perhaps?

WL: I think the Kentucky Derby would be the one out there. I don't think it's realistic that I could win the Triple Crown. I was kidding Bob Baffert, who has become a dear friend, and said, 'dammit you did it before I did it.' I would have liked to have done it. I'm constantly doing the best job I can with the horses I have, but I guess the Derby would be the goal.

TDN: Aside from your assistants, who are among the current trainers you admire most?

WL: Bob Baffert. He has that laid back attitude. He doesn't do things like I do. He asked me for a job once and didn't get it. He said, 'Thank God I didn't get it, you would have fired me. I don't get up that early in the morning.' Bob is definitely up there. Steve Asmussen does a tremendous job.

The knock against him with that PETA thing was totally unjust. If you go look at his horses they always look good. I think Chad Brown has come around. I thought Chad had maybe had a little chip on his shoulder because he had been working for Bobby [Frankel] and trying to prove himself, but he's come around. I like the way he's conducting himself lately with his interviews and all. I think he has come a long ways and he has matured. I like what he's doing. Most of the young guys are more interested in their percentages, because they're all over the Internet, than winning the races that count the most. It seems like there is a trend there. They don't want to run them if they're not 5-2 or lower. If they're 8-1, 10-1, they won't run. I don't have any problem with that. I won the Belmont with Commendable at 18-1. I never think I can't run that kind of horse in that kind of race.

TDN: What do you want your legacy to be? What do you want people to remember you for?

WL: Putting your record aside, the most important thing you can do as a trainer is to develop and give your clients who have supported you and have been with you and believed in you the ultimate high, a win in the Breeders' Cup, a Derby, a Preakness. That's it. After we won our first Derby, every time I went down there for a Breeders' Cup or a Triple Crown race, I thought I'm giving them the ultimate experience. I would like each one of them that I trained for to have that experience and say, 'That guy did us a helluva job, he got up early in the morning, he went to work, he did it right, we never had a positive test.' That would mean a lot to me. Most of my relationships have been far beyond client-trainer. Bill Young called me the night before he passed away. He said, 'Wayne, I don't have a lot on my mind. I just thought we should talk.' He would talk and he would get philosophical and then he said, 'Wayne, I'm getting tired and I'm going to hang up. I love you.' Click. You can't measure that. Gene Klein also called me the night before he passed away. He said, 'what are you doing?' I said 'I'm trying to make a living without you.' He asked me to come have lunch with him on the following Tuesday. He said 'I might send you back over to Keeneland. I'm feeling better. I might just send you over to Keeneland again and show those bastards that what we did just wasn't luck.' I've got two guys right now, Bill Mack and Bob Baker, that have been with me for 25 years or so. We've been second in the Derby, been in the Breeders' Cup, have had good horses like Grand Slam. We won the Hopeful. But the Derby is hanging out there. I was telling my wife the other day, I need to win one for those guys. I need to give them that feeling.