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THANKS TO A LITTLE LUCK AND SOME BIG-HEARTED FANS, 2001 TEXAS HORSE OF THE YEAR LIGHTS ON BROADWAY FINALLY GETS THE RETIREMENT HE DESERVES

BY SHELBY DOWNS

IT SHOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED TO HIM.

When people get involved in racing, it's often with the dream of owning a horse like Lights On Broadway. The Texas-bred turned heads on and off the track with his striking chestnut color and his undeniable speed and versatility, a potent combination that earned him the title of 2001 Texas Horse of the Year.

In a career that encompassed nine years, Lights On Broadway made 83 starts. Fifteen of those races ended with trips to the winner's circle, and 27 landed him second or third. He earned a staggering \$572,445, which may not make much of a dent on the national scene but finds him 13th on the list of the top Texas-bred earners of all-time.

His career reached its zenith in his 4-year-old season while running for breeder Joe McDermott and co-owner George Slater, but Lights On Broadway raced on a consistent basis until past his 11th birthday without ever taking a break longer than five months. Throughout those later years, the former Texas Champion descended gradually through the ranks until he reached rock-bottom, running for a \$2,500 tag at Nebraska's Fonner Park. His final win came at that level on April 14, 2007. The chart comments on his subsequent races read "no threat," "showed little" and "failed to menace."

When the Fonner Park meet ended in spring 2008, Lights On Broadway boarded the back of a truck bound for a slaughterhouse.

It shouldn't have happened to him. It shouldn't happen to any of them, but it's an all too familiar story in horse racing.

Luckily for Lights On Broadway, fate intervened in the form of Oklahoma-based Quarter Horse trainer Gregg Sanders. Even with his ribs clearly visible, the chestnut gelding sparked Sanders' interest, and when he got Lights' Jockey Club papers from the truck driver, his long and impressive race record convinced him that a horse like Lights didn't belong on that truck.

Sanders allowed his new purchase to rest and put him on a feeding program to gain back some much-needed weight. Lights' gentle disposition won over both Sanders and his 7-year-old daughter, who would pick his feet and brush his mane everyday. In his three races for Sanders at the Anthony State Fair in Kansas and Blue Ribbon Downs in Sallisaw, Oklahoma, Lights finished second, fourth and seventh.

A thousand miles away, Alex Brown kept tabs on the Texas-bred. An exercise rider at Woodbine for trainer Steve Asmussen, Brown became active in the anti-slaughter movement

after blogging the Barbaro story and later founded his own horse rescue website at www.alexbrownracing.com. He began following the careers of high-earning horses whose perfor-



ON DECEMBER 2, 2000, LIGHTS ON BROADWAY WON HIS FIRST CAREER STAKES, THE \$100,000 STAR OF TEXAS STAKES AT SAM HOUSTON RACE PARK. HE WOULD ULTIMATELY WIN SIX STAKES AND EARN \$572,445.

mance tailed off over time to the point where an end in the slaughterhouse could be a concern.

When Lights On Broadway popped up on his *Daily Racing Form* Watch List in August, Brown sought support from other groups, including the Fans of Barbaro, and people who had helped him rescue horses in the past, like Michigan resident Mary Overman.

"Lights On Broadway won a lot of money for a lot of people—he is the champion he was bred to be—but when he wasn't running like that champion anymore, someone chose to make a couple hundred bucks off Lights' slower body and shut the door on the rest of his life," Overman said. "I'm passionate about horse rescue

and think the humans who put cash in their pockets thanks to a horse's heart should find that horse a soft place to land where he can be retired or retrained."

Overman contacted Sanders, who agreed that his new runner should probably be retired. Thanks to Brown, Overman and others, the story of Lights On Broadway spread like wildfire through the online horse community, and donations to retire and re-home the 11-year-old horse began trickling in. The fundraising was slow and might still be ongoing if it hadn't been for the two women who would ultimately become Lights On Broadway's saviors.

TWO HELPING HANDS

"I was really moved by the story that this horse who was Horse of the Year in Texas could end up on a slaughter truck," said Donna Keen, who trains horses with her husband, Dallas. "I told Dallas, 'I just can't quit thinking about that stupid horse.' He wasn't the first horse that I rescued off a slaughter truck to bring here and rehab, and when I read the story, I knew that I could help him."

Keen contacted Mary Overman to offer a home and retraining for Lights On Broadway. Overman told her that whenever the money to retire Lights On Broadway was raised, transportation would still need to be arranged to bring him from

Oklahoma to the Keens' ranch in Burleson, south of Fort Worth. Keen knew just who to talk to about that.

"Angelo Trosclair with Thoroughbred Transport helps with the shipping for all of our rescues, so I asked him to arrange the transportation to get Lights back home," she said. "I offered to do the training so we could teach him a new career and he could still have a productive life."

Across the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, the plight of Lights On Broadway weighed heavily on another woman's mind. After the life-long racing fan (who prefers to remain anonymous) stumbled across Lights' story, she felt she had to do something to help, but she had no pasture to offer.

"By going out to Lone Star Park for so many years, I remembered that he was just such a great horse, and people actually would say that he was a classy horse," she recalled. "The last time I saw him running out there he was in an \$18,000 claiming race and then he just kind of disappeared and you didn't see him anymore. It was one of those things where in the back of your mind you wonder whatever happened to him because you go to the track all the time and see certain horses run and then you don't see them anymore. You kind of hope everyone's doing the right thing by them, especially a horse that had done so much locally."

"It broke my heart because I just cannot believe that he had fallen that far down the claiming ranks to be running for so low," she continued. "It was the fact that he was running at that level that just wasn't right."

Lights' predicament affected her so deeply that she decided to do something drastic to make a difference in his life—she donated the remaining \$3,000 to bring Lights On Broadway back to Texas.

"To me it was a lot of money but I felt like he needed to be retired and come home to Texas," she said. "I was hoping that since he was so well known that maybe his story would help the other horses who are not known except to the local people. It was just something that I felt needed

to be done. I'm not wealthy by any means but I was happy to do it. He has a home now and he's going to be taken care of, and that's all I wanted to see happen."

Lights On Broadway hadn't been in Texas for more than two years, but with the funds and



Courtesy Donna Keen

LIGHTS ON BROADWAY ARRIVED AT DONNA AND DALLAS KEEN'S FARM IN BURLESON, TEXAS, ON AUGUST 30, AFTER MORE THAN TWO YEARS AWAY FROM HIS HOME STATE.

transportation in place, on August 30, 2008, he finally came home.

BACK TO BASICS

Lights On Broadway arrived at the Keens' farm underweight and unfriendly.

"At first he was a disaster," Keen recalled. "He had never been social. He didn't know how to act so he would kick and strike and squeal. I left him in a paddock next to the other geldings for two weeks so he could nuzzle up to the fence and get to know them. When I let him out, I would scold him whenever he would strike or squeal. He's so smart that it didn't take him long to figure out he wasn't supposed to do that. The other horses tried to bully up on him for just a little bit but it didn't take long for him to tell them who the rich guy was. He's the boss of the pasture now."

He's also put on 100 pounds, and Keen hopes he'll add another 100 to his frame. After giving him a month off for some long overdue rest, she began riding him a little. By mid-October, he could be ridden without a bridle and seemed eager to learn.

"These Thoroughbreds aren't usually pasture horses," she said. "A good horse is active and

creative, and they get into trouble if you just kick them out. Horses are so much smarter than people give them credit for. He's incredibly smart, and he learns everything we teach him so easy. He's just really come a long way."

The Keens have extensive experience retraining and rehabilitating Thoroughbreds after they leave the racetrack. In the past two years, they have helped retrain and find homes for 35 former racehorses. Their charges have gone on to become everything from barrel racers to trail horses to stadium jumpers.

"If you rehab them right and give them the time they need, their bodies are resilient and they'll heal themselves," she said. "Just give them that time and don't rush them and they'll tell you when they're well and ready to do something else. And then you have to find something that they like doing. Some horses may not make a jumper or a racetrack pony no matter how bad we want them to. Some are just not cut out for that. But they're all cut out for something, just like people. You've just got to find something they enjoy doing and they will excel."

With Lights On Broadway's long race record, Keen thinks he will thrive as a racetrack pony, and given how well he has been training, she hopes to have him ready to begin his new career at the Lone Star Park or Fair Grounds meets.

"Lights always had a lot of class when he was at the racetrack," she said. "He has such a history there. Ex-racehorses like being at the track; they just don't want to race anymore. He'll probably enjoy standing out there and watching all these young guys work."

REMEMBER ME

Lights On Broadway recently took a break from his training to welcome a very special visitor—the donor who played such a central role in giving him a new lease on life.

"I knew at the track that he was special," the donor said. "The whole issue of unwanted horses and slaughter is just a complicated issue, and you try to do what you can with limited resources."

Keen keeps in touch with the donor and sends her pictures showing Lights' progress in his new vocation. Keen also posts updates on her blog at mythoroughbredblog.blogspot.com.

"That woman has the biggest heart," Keen said of the donor. "She's a real sweet lady for what she did. I'm so grateful and thankful for

her. She jumped in, stepped up to the plate and got him home.”

Since Lights On Broadway’s return to Texas, Keen has received countless letters, e-mails and phone calls wishing him well. His story has popped up on blogs, forums and newspaper and magazine articles.

“It just shows how big of an effort went into it and shows that horsemen are not all greedy people,” she said. “When it comes down to it, horsemen really do love horses.”

While Lights On Broadway has found a happy ending in a new beginning, Keen is well aware that not all ex-racehorses are so lucky. She and Dallas plan to use Lights’ story to raise awareness about the responsibility all horsemen have to the animals that help them earn their livelihoods.

“This happens way too much, and I plead with people to locate responsible homes for their ex-racers,” she said. “We hope to be able to use Lights On Broadway as an ambassador to show people how smart and retrainable these fine athletes are. They deserve better than the fate of too many.” ★



Courtesy Danna Keen

ALTHOUGH IT TOOK HIM A WHILE AT FIRST, LIGHTS ON BROADWAY HAS ADJUSTED WELL TO PASTURE LIFE AT THE KEENS’ FARM, WHERE HE IS TURNED OUT WITH OTHER RESCUED AND RETIRED RACEHORSES, INCLUDING DALLAS’ RACETRACK PONY, BLUE.

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