

Throwback Thursday: Victor Dakin Was King Of The Hills At Radnor

By: Lindsay Berreth
Oct 12, 2016 - 5:35 PM



Denny Emerson and Victor Dakin on their way to winning the advanced championships at the 1976 Radnor Hunt Horse Trials. Photo by Gamecock

Denny Emerson may never have known the exact breeding of Victor Dakin, but whatever he was, he knew he was special.

The diminutive gelding was the horse that made Emerson, taking him to the 1974 World Eventing Championships (England) where they earned a team gold medal for the United States, and carrying him to victory in the advanced division at the 1976 Radnor-Hahnemann Three-Day Event Championships (Pa.).

For decades, the Radnor Hunt Club hosted a destination three-day with a CCI** and preliminary horse trials at the hunt club's grounds in Malvern, Pa., on the second weekend in October. The last CCI to take place at Radnor was in 2006, though they still run a horse trials.

We took a look back at Emerson's victory at Radnor 40 years ago in the *Chronicle* archives.

Emerson was already a successful advanced level rider when he bought a then 10-year-old Victor Dakin from Canadian team hopeful Jane Shemilt. Her father, Arne Johansen bred him, but Emerson was never sure of his full pedigree.

"One story I heard was that his mother was a Thoroughbred, theoretically, and his sire was supposed to be part Morgan, part Arab and part Irish Draught," he said. "But then some other lady from Quebec wrote me and said his father was an Arabian."

Shemilt did a few advanceds on him, but he wasn't favored by the Canadian team coach at the time, and she decided to attend photography school, so she put him up for sale.

Emerson bought him for \$5,000 in 1973, but soon realized he was tough in dressage.

The pair competed at the Ledyard Farm Horse Trials (Mass.) and several screening trials in 1974 before they were selected for the team along with Bruce Davidson, Michael Plumb and Don Sachey.

"He was a tough little horse. A good, good jumper, very brave," said Emerson. "I went for five years with him without a cross-country jump fault. He was nervous in the dressage. I mean, I didn't know how to ride either! Maybe if I had him now I could have gotten through to him better, but I didn't know how then.

"The first Ledyard I took him to, I sort of rode him off the fences thinking you had to sort of help him, and I think I had one or two quits, but I finished," he continued. "I realized with a horse like 'Victor,' you just pressed him to the jump, and he backed himself off. He was an attack machine. He wanted to go, and if you just rode him hard at the jumps and let him fire, that was how he wanted to go."

Emerson remembered a few details of his championship-winning ride at Radnor in 1976.

"I remember there was on really hairy fence. It was a narrow corner, and when I walked it the night before, there was a barway sort of on the far side of the point of the V. Mike Plumb, who was riding Good Mixture, the horse that had just won silver at the Olympics, said 'They took that barway out, you're going to have to angle it a little differently because it's an easy run-out. He had just had a run-out there. Probably I might well have had a run-out if Mike hadn't have warned me not to, and I wound up beating him. It gives you an example of what an amazingly good sport Mike was.'"



Denny Emerson accepting the advanced championship trophy at the 1976 Radnor Horse Trials. Photo by Martie Siem

Radnor usually hosted the national intermediate championships, but that year they'd added the advanced to fill in when Ledyard, which had hosted in the past, didn't run.

Emerson remembers the hills being a big factor, and the festiveness surrounding the event as the last big event of the year.

"At Radnor, there's a lot of roll to that ground. You don't realize when you cross the road, there's a big climb up and a big drop back. The horses have to be really fit. I had a big advantage I think coming down from Vermont. I'd been doing a lot of my conditioning in the mountains," he said.

Emerson competed Victor at Ledyard in 1977 and eventually he became a schoolmaster for Shemilt's half-sister. He competed into his mid-20s and was put down due to old age.

“He was probably the most important horse I ever had in the sense that a gold medal horse changes the trajectory of your career,” said Emerson. “I think York was a more talented horse, Epic Win was a more all-around horse. I rode advanced for 29 years and had 14 horses, which is nothing compared to these guys today with all their sponsors, but that was an average of about one every two years. I always tried to have some greenie coming along in the pipeline while I was riding the next one. It was a very different world then.”

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