

ON OUR  
COVER

World's Grand Champion  
CCV Casey's Final Countdown  
with Michele Macfarlane



**B**loemfontein is near the southern tip of South Africa a long, long way from Freedom Hall in Louisville, Ky. and CCV Casey's Final Countdown has had an incredible journey.

Si-Si Stables in South Africa is owned and operated by Chris and Ruelda Viljoen and their two daughters, Cheri and Christil Casey. Having purchased their first American Saddlebred in 1983, they've spent the last 24 years researching bloodlines and building their breeding program. The two daughters each received some money from their maternal grandmother in 1995 and decided to invest the money in stud fees and breed their mares. Christil's mare, (SA) Rinati American Twist, who traces back to CH Wing Commander, was bred to the newly imported stud, Advocator (CH Foxfire's Prophet x Some Enchanted Evening) and CCV Casey's Final Countdown was foaled in 1996.

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three-gaited horse, and entered the pair in a limit pleasure class at Del Mar. Debbie was hooked, and probably would have been no matter where she placed. (She won.) “I couldn’t stop smiling because [the mare’s] energy and heart were something I had never felt in a horse before.”

In the summer of 2001, Bill and Debbie bought the last Hackney pony that legendary pony trainer Bill Robinson worked before he died. The following year they took Pacifico’s Standing Ovation to Louisville, where Debbie won the Hackney Pony Pleasure Driving World’s Championship. Debbie also owns and shows CH French Silk Stockings, a five-times World’s Champion Three-Gaited Pleasure mare and the 2007 World’s Champion of Champions.

Other happy horse and rider combos at the barn include Patti DeVault, who owns two horses for her daughter Julie: Wee Pee’s Storm, Reserve World’s Champion Juvenile Horse and Reserve World’s Champion Junior Three-Gaited Horse. Bill bought The Full Monty for Julie from Elizabeth Shatner, who won the Amateur Five-Gaited World’s Championship with him in 2003. Two years later Julie rode him to a Juvenile Five-Gaited Reserve World’s Championship.

Gail Hooker owns the gaited horse Undulata’s Prophet, Reserve World’s Champion in his junior year; Champion Forever Aptor, a five-gaited pleasure horse; the harness horse Heir About Him; a two-year-old named Rapid Reward; and a Western horse named Wine’s Special Flair. Other owners include Joanne Weiner, who has been showing Saddlebreds for over 50 years and owns Heartland King Of Kings, the 2006 Reserve World’s Champion Hackney Pleasure Driving Pony. Jack Reich owns the harness horse Kalarama’s On A Roll, and a gaited junior horse, Mickey Blue Eyes. Linda Bradley owns Rox No Salt, a five-gaited junior horse. Sixteen-year-old Loni Fuller rides CH Ultrasuede. Jennifer Sefton owns Picante and Ridgefield’s Emerald, and Mark and Cynthia Bishop and their daughters Sami and Ali show Callaway’s Party Time in the juvenile three-gaited pleasure division, and Tip Me Do in the juvenile five-gaited division.

It’s been a long, devious road to Louisville and World’s Champion Saddlebreds for Debbie, and an even longer one for Bill. But they and their customers agree that the journey was worth it.

“He was a bit of a disappointment on looks,” stated Chris Viljoen, “so we left him in the field with his dam for 18 months and let him grow up.” When the colt was first started, their trainer was Martiens Ceaser. “Martiens always had an excuse not to show Countdown to us, then one day he said he had something he wanted us to see,” remembers Viljoen. “What a surprise — Countdown in the jog bike, like an old pro, and we all realized that we had something very special with this horse!”

They decided to send him to a professional trainer and Pieter Snyman (now with Caughman Farms in South Carolina) pointed the colt towards the fine harness division. “Peter took him to the Reserve Champion Two-Year-Old at our National Championships in South Africa,” stated Viljoen. Despite discouragement, Viljoen wanted to try and gait the young stallion. “People thought I was crazy, because he was such a brilliant fine harness horse, and because he had so much hock. They said he would never rack,” Viljoen recalls. Countdown returned home and Martiens, after a few months work, “He showed us the most beautiful ‘old time slow gait’ that we had ever seen,” smiled Viljoen. Martiens was forced to leave Si-Si Stables due to poor health and Jan Kok took the reins. “Two months later we took him to the show at Phillipolis, which is like our own Lexington Junior League,” said Viljoen. “He won the qualifying class and became the talk of the show, then returned to win the Championship.”

By the age of five, Countdown had won the South African Five-Gaited Stallion title at all the major shows. Michele Macfarlane of Scripps Miramar in San Diego had seen photos and a video of his win at Phillipolis and traveled to South Africa to see the stud. She partnered with Si-Si Stables to import the horse to the US. “I thought the importation process was almost impossible and without the help of Lisa Heres-Rosenberger, I couldn’t have made it happen,” said Macfarlane.

In November, 2003, Countdown became a US citizen and hit the in-gate in 2004, winning at Del Mar Charity Fair and Santa Barbara before making

his debut in Freedom Hall to a fourth place finish in the Stallion Stake. Commenting on the horse’s progress since then, Macfarlane stated, “Where the horse came from, the training methods were very different. I don’t think the South African finished product was the finished product I needed to make him a success in the US.” 2005 brought more wins on the West Coast and a second trip to the Kentucky State Fair, where he stepped up to third in the Stallion Stake. In 2006, Macfarlane and Countdown continued to win all the major stakes in their region, but did not attend Louisville.

They had done their homework and 2007 would be his year. Macfarlane surprised Kentucky with an appearance at Rock Creek in June, winning the Five-Gaited Jackpot Stake. They went back to California and within 30 days won at Charity Fair, UPHA Almost Summer and the Santa Barbara National. This year at Louisville he stepped up one more notch in the Stallion Stake and was second, but seemed the People’s Choice. When the bugle sounded Saturday night for the Five-Gaited World’s Championship, many felt the field was wide open. Countdown wowed the crowd with his distinctive gaits and had plenty of gas left in the tank for a five horse workout. “I am just crazy about this horse,” Macfarlane said. “There is nothing like riding an athletic, game, charismatic Saddlebred stallion.”

Countdown brings to mind another powerful chestnut stallion, <sup>WGC CH</sup> Sky Watch, who she piloted to the same victory almost 20 years ago. That was a landmark event, making her the first woman and the first amateur to win the Five-Gaited World’s Grand Championship. She did it a second time in 1996 with the grand gelding, Memories’ Citation.

Plans are for Countdown to remain in the US and continue his show and breeding careers. He has four foals currently registered this year. “People are pleased with his offspring,” said Macfarlane. “I’ve seen some pictures and the foals look a lot like him.” Here’s hoping they can rack and trot like him too — and that there will be many more to come.