

# On Top of His Game

With durability, strength, and horsemanship, jockey Mike Smith has crafted a career unlike any other

BY BEKAH WRIGHT

AS THE SON OF A JOCKEY, ONE COULD SAY Michael Earl Smith was born to race horses. He grew up on a farm in Roswell, New Mexico where equines were a part of everyday life and he spent Sundays at the track watching quarter horse sprints. Yet it was seeing the prestigious Triple Crown races on television that inspired Smith to dream big. “I told my grandmother one day I hoped to ride in those races,” he recalls.

Smith began racing at age 11, earned his jockey’s license at 16, and eventually left home to race full time, earning an apprenticeship in Santa Fe. “I just wanted to ride,” he says. “I didn’t know where it was going to take me, but as long as I was on a horse, it really didn’t matter.”

Fortunately for Smith, riding has taken him to the pinnacle of his sport. The Hall-of-Fame jockey has earned over 5,000 career wins, including a record-breaking 17 Breeders’ Cup titles. Name a major horse racing award—Eclipse, Big Sport of Turfdom, Mike

Venezia Memorial, and George Woolf—Smith has earned it.

So which race stands out the most, like a homestretch finish in slow motion? Smith fondly remembers his first Breeders’ Cup race in 1992—Gulfstream Park’s Mile race in South Florida. “It meant a lot to me,” he says.

“It was my first opportunity to ride in a race like that, and it was a win with a horse named Lure.” Smith would win again the following year at Santa Anita.

Smith’s confident style, intuition, and ability to perform under pressure are the reasons owners and trainers covet him. He’ll be the favorite in many

Breeders’ Cup races this year, including the Distaff atop Royal Delta. “Mike’s very good at coming out of the gate and is good on or off pace,” says thoroughbred trainer Bob Baffert, who thinks Smith rides with a virtual target on his back. “It’s as if he doesn’t know the pressure’s there.”

At 48, Smith has no plans to retire. Indeed, his stringent weight training routine gives him a rock-solid physique yet it’s his internal ambition that keeps him going. “Everything I accomplished—I’d do it all over again,” he says. “Sometimes the second time around is even better because you can appreciate and enjoy it a lot more.” What beats winning a second big race? “The third,” he admits, “or the fourth.”



FROM LEFT: BC/BEN VAN HOOK; BC/TODD BUCHANAN