



SOLID CITIZEN

Patriot stood proudly in the winner's circle after leading the charge with Nathan Piper at The Run For A Million.

Article by *Kelsey Pecsek Hruska*

There aren't many things that can compare to stepping in the show pen with a half-million dollars on the line. Just ask Nathan Piper.

It took Piper two decades to reach NRHA Million Dollar Rider status earlier this year, but just a few months later, he's more than halfway to his next million-dollar milestone. Following an unforgettable winning performance aboard Patriot at The Run For A Million (TRFAM), presented by Teton Ridge, he added a hefty \$500,000 paycheck to his record.

Perhaps the hardest part of clinching the largest paycheck in reining is keeping it to yourself for a few months. While TRFAM's Million Dollar class was held in

Las Vegas on Aug. 20, an embargo prevented reiners from sharing the news until November. After 10 weeks of secrecy, it's time to celebrate the TRFAM Million Dollar competition champions.

Piper earned his spot in the Million Dollar class in March at the Cactus Reining Classic, where he piloted Shannon and Hershel Reid's Patriot to a 227.5 for a third-place finish in the qualifier. The duo rode that wave of momentum to April's National Reining Breeders Classic (NRBC), where a final-round 222 landed them second in the Level 3 Open.

Patriot and Piper were primed and ready when they arrived for TRFAM at the South Point Equestrian Center, but the Million

Dollar field was stacked. 2019 Million Dollar Invitational Co-Champions Cade McCutcheon and Craig Schmersal were both on the roster, as was 2021 runner up Shawn Florida with Spooks Gotta Spark — the only horse to compete in the Million Dollar class all three years. NRHA's all-time leading rider Andrea Fappani had a seat at the table alongside 2022 NRHA Level 4 Open Derby Champions Casey Deary and Americasnexttopgun, as well as 2021 NRBC Level 4 Open Co-Champions Dany Tremblay and Tinker With Dreams.

The pressure was clearly on, but it didn't faze Piper and Patriot. The team ran into the arena on fresh ground from draw five and held nothing back.

Patriot climbed to the top of the charts to become reining's all-time leading horse when he and Nathan Piper marked a 235 to win TRFAM Million Dollar class.



WALTZENBERRY



Warp-speed turns started off Patriot's performance on a high note. The stallion's run continued to build, earning three 78.5 scores, one 78 and one 77 from the five judges in the South Point Equestrian Center arena.



Overcome with emotion, Piper rushed to hug his wife, Jean, after realizing he and Patriot had won the Million Dollar competition in Las Vegas.

Fast Five Facts: Million Dollar Edition

1. NRHA Seven Million Dollar Sire Gunnatrashya, the only stallion with more than one offspring in the class, was represented by four entries. They finished second, seventh, ninth and 12th.
2. Jody Puno of Puno Performance Horses LLC was the only owner with two performers in the class this year.
3. Hilldale Farm and Rhodes River Ranch were the only breeders with more than one horse in this year's class. They each had two competitors in the arena.
4. The last two TRFAM Million Dollar class champions are from the Toyon Ranch LLC breeding program.
5. Six riders — Casey Deary, Andrea Fappani, Shawn Florida, Cade McCutcheon, Craig Schmersal and Jason Vanlandingham — have competed in the Million Dollar class every year since its inception.

"I don't remember much, but it was incredible," Piper said of the performance. "It felt great, and he was on. It was so loud, but you have to tune it out. I kept hearing it [the crowd], and then trying to tune it out as I was running."

The audience had reason to scream and cheer; they were watching something incredible unfold with every maneuver. In the end, the judges ushered Patriot and Piper to the top of the leaderboard with an incredible 235.

On a normal day at a normal show, winning with a score like that is typically a sure thing. But TRFAM isn't your average reining. The best of the best in both horsepower and horsemanship converge for some of the sport's biggest payouts; it's not surprising the class has since been called the best reining in history by many industry veterans.

One after another, the competition pushed hard in pursuit of the win. The scoreboard when the dust settled was unprecedented; the top six marked a 230 or better, and the next seven teams scored above a 225.

LEFT: WALTENBERRY; RIGHT: KELSEY PECSEK HRUSKA



First prize at TRFAM was a half-million-dollar paycheck. Piper now boasts lifetime earnings of more than \$1.6 million, and the sum pushed Patriot's record to \$834,000-plus.

"I feel so blessed," Piper said after winning. "I just praise the lord Jesus for helping me get through this day. This is the biggest reining, and it's amazing. I can't describe it."

Piper, who turned over his non pro card to become an NRHA Professional in 1999, now boasts

nearly \$1.6 million in NRHA money. Many horses have carried him to success in his career, but none so much as Patriot. The stallion, bred by Toyon Ranch LLC, is responsible for nearly half of Piper's lifetime earnings.

There's no question that Patriot

is comfortable in the limelight.

The 7-year-old stallion's record surpassed \$834,000 in Las Vegas, landing him squarely at the top of the standings as reining's all-time leading show horse. He's followed by 2021 TRFAM Million Dollar Champion Gunna Stop, another

MILLION DOLLAR COMPETITION RESULTS

RANK	HORSE	PEDIGREE	RIDER	OWNER	BREEDER	SCORE	PAYOUT
1	Patriot	(Smart Spook x Dunit A Lil Ruf)	Nathan Piper	Shannon & Hershel Reid	Toyon Ranch LLC	235	\$500,000
2	Trash Talkin Spook	(Gunnatrashya x I Spook)	Andrea Fappani	Marilyn Overgaard	Vicki Lyn Dias	234	\$100,000
3	Americasnexttopgun	(Walla Walla Whiz x Americasnextgunmodel)	Casey Deary	Jody Puno/Puno Performance Horses LLC	Arcese Quarter Horses USA	233.5	\$80,000
4	Modern Gun	(Gunnars Special Nite x Taris Modern Design)	Cade McCutcheon	MS Stables	Turnabout Farm Inc.	231.5	\$70,000
5	Msdreamy	(Magnum Chic Dream x A Gal With A Gun)	Arno Honstetter	Rick Christen	Jana Simons	231	\$60,000
6	Best Shine	(Shine Chic Shine x Best Stop)	Jason Vanlandingham	Robert Santagata	Wagman Ranch Inc.	230	\$50,000
7	Trashy Lil Lady	(Gunnatrashya x SLJ Sweet N Juicy)	Sean McBurney	Blair Moffett	George & Lindy Longfellow	229.5	\$40,000
8	No Mans Whizkey	(Whizkey N Diamonds x SS Rosa)	Jordan McBurney	David Stroud & Terri Conover-Stroud	Rhodes River Ranch	229	\$30,000
9	Smoking Trash	(Gunnatrashya x Snip O Gun)	Francesco Martinotti	Enjåy LLC	Hilldale Farm	228.5	\$20,000
10	Tinker With Dreams	(Tinker With Guns x This Chicsdndreamin)	Dany Tremblay	Diamond Dub Quarter Horses	Rhodes River Ranch	227.5	\$10,000
11	Gunnabeabrightstar	(ARC Gunnabeabigstar x Abbie Be Tuff)	Fernando Salgado	Neiberger Performance Horses LLC	Solum & Andersen	227	\$9,000
12	Gunnarickashay	(Gunnatrashya x Rondas Tio)	Josh Tishman	Jody Puno/Puno Performance Horses LLC	Hilldale Farm	226	\$8,000
13	What A Wave	(Tidal Wave Jack x What A Sunrise)	Craig Schmersal	Nimroid Vannietvelt	Sam Ellis	225.5	\$7,000
14	Gunnin For Chicks	(Gunner x Dun It By Chick)	Billy Williams	Mark Bradford	Mark Bradford	222.5	\$6,000
15	Spooks Gotta Spark	(Spooks Gotta Whiz x Dolittle Lena)	Shawn Florida	Kevin Truax	Bobby Lewis	222	\$5,000
16	Frozen Shining Gun	(Colonels Shining Gun x Frozen Slide)	Matt Palmer	Rachel Stanevich	Andrzej Cioek	220	\$5,000

WALTENBERRY

Toyon Ranch-bred stallion.

“We have the most special bond,” Piper said of Patriot. “We’ve been together since he was 2. A bond like that is once in a lifetime.

“His intelligence is beyond belief; I think he’s smarter than I am,” the Whitesboro, Texas-based trainer added. “I’m serious; he has an intelligence that I have not seen in another animal. And he’s intelligent in a good way. He doesn’t try to cheat me. He’s right on the money. He knows more than the average, and he’s honest.”

Patriot’s been “on the money”

numerous times since his debut four years ago. His 3-year-old season included a top 15 finish in the Level 4 Open and a sixth in Level 3 at the NRHA Futurity. In 2019, the stallion tied to win the Level 4 Open at the NRBC and finished third in the same class at the NRHA Derby with a 230.5. Later that year, he won the American Quarter Horse Association Junior Reining World Championship.

A strong showing at the 2021 Cactus Reining Classic ushered him and Piper into last year’s TRFAM Million Dollar competition, where

they marked a 224 for seventh. Coming back for a second shot at victory was special for the Reids.

“It’s been supernatural,” Hershel said. “We’ve never experienced anything like this. We’re really blessed.”

“I don’t have the words to say how blessed we are. He [Patriot] has been a gift from God from day one. The horse is just a dream come true,” Shannon added. “He’s sound, sane, happy, and we wouldn’t have it any other way. He’s just an amazing animal.”

Patriot began breeding mares



Giving Back

With a name like Patriot, Shannon and Hershel Reid’s stallion represents something a little more to many in the industry. That unintended consequence set the stage for a philanthropic opportunity at The Run For A Million (TRFAM).

TRFAM show officials organized a fundraiser for the Night Stalker Association (NSA), a nonprofit benefitting the Night Stalker soldiers of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) and their families.

“Known as Night Stalkers, these soldiers are recognized for their proficiency in nighttime operations,” NSA member Preston Cockrell said in a press release. “They are highly trained and ready to accomplish the very toughest missions in all environments, anywhere in the world, day or night, with unparalleled precision.”

A live auction of a one-of-a-kind custom set of

spurs fashioned from decommissioned M134 mini gun barrels by NRHA Professional Justin “Gunny” Mathison raised money for the NSA, and the Reids agreed to match the donation in honor of Patriot, who won the Million Dollar class the next day.

“They have restored my faith in humanity. They are amazing people,” Shannon Reid said of the NSA. “We didn’t want it [the show] to be about us; we wanted to give back.”

TRFAM and the Reids raised \$130,000 for the NSA, and all the proceeds will go directly to the soldiers and their families, TRFAM officials stated.

“That’s the real blessing,” Hershel Reid said. “A patriot fights vigorously for their country, and that’s what those men and women in the 160th unit do. Day in and day out, they lay down their lives for all of us so that we can have freedom. I think they deserve a lot of honor and respect for that, and I hope this benefit helps them out a whole lot.”

last year, and his first foals hit the ground this spring. Piper said although they're still young, he can always spot one of the stallion's offspring because "he's putting his mark on them."

"He's beautiful, and he has an attitude better than any horse I've ever seen in my life," Hershel said. "He loves what he does. He misses the arena when he's not in there. He craves to get back in the arena."

So, what's next for Patriot? Will his fans get to see him back in the show pen? The Reids deferred to Piper, who simply offered these few words: "To be continued ..." ❖



Trash Talkin Spook and Andrea Fappani were hot on the competition's heels. They marked a 234 in the class, missing top honors by merely 1 point.

The Reunion Tour

NRHA Four Million Dollar Rider Craig Schmersal didn't have to think twice about his answer when Steve Vannietvelt and Gina De Pauw asked if he wanted to ride three-time NRHA Open World Champion What A Wave at The Run For A Million (TRFAM).

"Shoot, yeah!"

The trainer hadn't ridden the 14-year-old stallion since 2014, when he was sold to Vannietvelt and De Pauw. Before the sale, Schmersal and What A Wave had a good deal of success, most notably earning the Level 4 Open Reserve Championship at the 2014 National Reining Breeders Classic.

Nicknamed "Dude" around the Schmersal ranch, What A Wave (Tidal Wave Jac x What A Sunrise) found even more success in Europe. With NRHA Two Million Dollar Rider Bernard Fonck aboard, the stallion won three NRHA Open World Championships and an Individual gold medal for Belgium at the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games.

His final year of competition was in 2019 with Vannietvelt, and they won several European Non Pro reinings. He was then retired to the breeding shed — his first foals were born in 2016 — until he was shipped back to the United States for TRFAM.

What A Wave met up with the Schmersals at this year's NRHA Derby in Oklahoma City, and his former trainer wasn't the only one excited to see



the horse, whose sweet disposition always made him a family favorite.

"He's got a heart of gold, and he's golden-minded," Schmersal said.

Though What A Wave didn't win at TRFAM, he did accomplish one of the goals Schmersal had for him: American audiences got to watch a performance by one of the sport's most decorated reining horses.

"I think that horse deserves that shot in front of that crowd with his record," Schmersal said before the event. "I think a lot of people want to see him, and I think he deserves the recognition back here in the States." —Molly Montag