

RUSSEL HADLEY

The young jockey from a family of horsemen

has embarked on a promising career.

By Andrea Caudill

IN THE HORSE WORLD, BLOOD TELLS. TOP HORSES BEGET TOP horses, and in the racing game, top horsemen often beget top horsemen. The Hadley family from the Intermountain West has produced a number of top horsemen, seeing its newest star in the form of 26-year-old jockey Russel Hadley, who has in seven years become a top jockey in races around the country.

Russel and younger sister Roxann were raised on Pete Parella's Legacy Ranch at Chino, California (now located in Clements). The children of Shaun and Anita Hadley, they grew up with the likes of champion racehorses Griswold and Apprehend in their backyard, and the legacy of top rodeo and racing horsemen like grandfather Blaine and their uncles Sherm and Sid in their blood.

"I grew up not wanting to be (a jockey)," Russel says. "At the time, I thought the horses were crazy. (*laughs*) I didn't want nuthin' to do with them. I guess I didn't not want to (ride races), but to me it was just a job."

The job when he was a teenager was starting horses for his dad at the Legacy Ranch. The hobby was team roping – first heading, then heeling. Immersed in horses, those around young Russel encouraged an interest in riding the rope horses' faster cousins.

He spent the summers in the Intermountain region with his uncle Sherm, heading to his Ogden, Utah, ranch as soon as school let out.

By 15, Russel was galloping horses for his

dad, and one day while roping at his grandfather's place, his uncles again encouraged him to try race riding, and he began to mull the idea around.

"We had this filly there (at Legacy Ranch) – she'd come back (to the ranch) and we gave her a break and brought her back as a 3-year-old, sent her back to Los Al," he says. "I told my dad I wanted to work her out of the gate, first time ever for me. That's when I wanted to ride:

The first time I ever worked a horse out of the gate."

Decision made, Russel got his license at 19, and began his riding career at Wyoming Downs when his uncle Sherm boosted him into the saddle for the first time on July 6, 2002.

He rode two summers in Utah and Wyoming before heading home to give California a try.

"The first year (at Los Alamitos), I think I had a little bit of an advantage over any other rider starting there, because any trainer that has been there on the backside watched me grow up and has known my family forever. I'm not going to say I had it all handed to me – I still had to work to get good horses, like anybody else, but because of my background and family, it worked out a little easier for me, maybe."

In 2004, his 317 mounts were in the money 33 percent of the time, racking up nearly \$300,000 in earnings. The following



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RICHARD
CHAMBERLAIN

year, it jumped to more than \$500,000.

“A racehorse isn’t no different than a rope horse or a calf horse or a barrel horse,” Russel observes. “They all have little niches about them, and you have to listen to them. They can’t talk to you. You have to figure out what they are saying, what they are trying to tell you. You learn from just being around any kind of horse – an athlete. Any kind of athletic horse that has to work will talk to you. You just have to listen.”

In 2006, Hadley ventured east to ride for Heath Taylor and had a breakout year. He rode First Carolina to victory in the Heritage Place Futurity (G1), Dynamax in the Lee Berwick Memorial Futurity (RG1), St Pats First in the Firecracker Derby (G2), A Silver Goblin in the Valley Junction Futurity (G2), La Jollaroid in the Sam Houston Classic (G2) and four other stakes winners. He also got his first try at the All American Futurity (G1), riding First Freeze in the final. His 368 mounts won at a 17 percent clip and were in the money 43 percent of the time. They earned \$1,513,349.

“I don’t really get nervous,” he says of riding a big race. “I just focus on trying to ride the perfect race and trying to get as much out of my horse as I can get.

“During the race, it’s just another race,” he continues. “I get more excited after the race, watching the replay, than I do during the race. I think that if you get too excited, you might make a mistake, start over-riding, drop my whip or something like that. You have to ride every race – you know you’re in front, it’s a big race, a Grade 1, and you are way more alert, you’re paying way more attention but you have to focus. After the race is when you get butterflies and stuff like that.”

The long-term consequences for the horses he rides are not lost on him, either.

“You have to be mature, really mature, especially when you get into riding for big stables,” Hadley says. “For example, Bobby Cox has some of the best horses in the country, blood-wise; he has some of the best mares there are, and he breeds to the best studs there are.

“Bobby is real down to earth,” he continues. “He expects a lot out of his horses, but he understands when horses have problems. (But when riding those horses), you have to be mentally mature, be professional. It’s not like you’re riding \$5,000 claimers – you just don’t go out there and if you don’t win the race, it don’t matter. You’re in a situation where you’re trying to make good horses better. Like Zoomin With Ease – that improved his dam’s quality. I think about stuff like that. If I owned his mares, I want the babies to do as good as possible, to make the value of the mares better. You have to think about that stuff – or I do, anyway – when you’re riding Grade 1 horses in million-dollar races.”



Ponied by fiancée Amanda Buchanan, Russel Hadley is aboard King Brimmerton in the All American Derby.

This year is a big one for Russel, as well. In July, he rode Bobby Cox’s Zoomin With Ease to victory in the Ruidoso Futurity (G1) and Turbulenz to win the TQHA Sale Futurity (RG1). And on December 19, he will marry fiancée Amanda Buchanan, daughter of John and Iris Buchanan. The two were introduced in 2006 by the late Sam Thompson, during trial races at Lone Star Park.

Russel, and the Quarter Horse racing world, lost a friend when Sam died on Christmas Day after a riding accident. Russel rides with Sam’s initials on the side of his helmet cover.

“I would like to be remembered just like Sam Thompson is,” Russel says on the legacy he hopes to leave. “Sam was my best friend. He taught me a lot. He was a great guy. There is nobody in this world who can ever say a bad thing about Sam Thompson, and that’s how I’d like to be remembered. I’d like to be remembered as a good rider, also, somebody who was able to ride. But as a person, I’d like to be remembered like Sam.

“I have an ST on the side of my helmet cover, for him,” he continues. “As long as I’m riding, he’s still riding, too.”