



Local Man's Mare Going for Kentucky Derby of Quarter Horses

By Trish Dewall • Iowa City Press-Citizen
• October 8, 2010 www.press-citizen.com
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Tom Lepic talks about Spit Curl Diva with the same love and pride any father would have for his child.

Though he knows she's just a horse, perhaps it's Lepic's innate passion for horse racing as a sport and a business that makes this 4-year-old mare even more special.

On October 2, Spit Curl put herself solidly in the running to be named World Champion Quarter Horse for 2010. Drawing a comparison to the more familiar world of thoroughbred racing, this honor would be even bigger than winning the Kentucky Derby.

On 10:1 odds, Spit Curl won the 14th running of the Refrigerator Handicap at Lone Star Park near Dallas. The only mare in a 10-horse field that included nine stallions much bigger in stature - including 2008's world champion, Stolis Winner - Spit Curl burst from the gate and held the lead all 440 yards to the finish.

You can bet, Lepic said, that she'll never race at 10:1 odds again.

"When you first get into the horse racing business, you just can't wait to win

your first race," Lepic said. "And then you hope to win stakes races in your own state of Iowa and be able to pay for the sport. But now, to suddenly have a horse that's one of the best in the entire world - it's breathtaking for me."

Lepic, 57, a real estate broker and owner in Iowa City, is a true horseman with an involvement in the sport dating back to the early 1970s. While attending the University of Iowa, where he also was a member of the storied wrestling team, he was approached about becoming a jockey.

"I was athletic and small and they thought they could make a jockey out of me," he said. "So I gave it a try and became real successful."

He was the leading jockey in the Eastern Iowa Quarter Horse Racing Association for three straight years, 1974-76. Then a physical education teacher and coach at West High, Lepic toyed with the idea of making racing a full-time career.

Those thoughts were put to rest after a series of several accidents, the last of which left Lepic unconscious for several days in 1978.

"The doctor said I had enough damage that if it happened again, I might not

come to," he said. "And my son, Matt, had been born two weeks prior to that, so it was an easy decision to say, 'Let's stick with teaching and coaching.'"

In 1993, Lepic re-entered the sport as a breeder and owner when he purchased his first brood mare in foal. He named the foal "Eye the Hawkeye," and the horse raced for 10 years, earning \$265,000 and a spot in the Iowa Quarter Horse Racing Hall of Fame.

Never had he imagined he'd own such a successful horse.

"It wasn't even a thought, to tell you the truth," Lepic said. "At that time, I thought I'd never have a horse that would be better than him. I thought he'd end up being the best horse I'd ever own. And then all of a sudden (Spit Curl Diva) comes along and now for sure I say I'll never have a horse better than her."

Lepic owns Spit Curl in a partnership with the Morgan Family from Oklahoma City, a benefit to both himself and the horse because a member of the family is Spit Curl's veterinarian and is able to closely watch over her. Lepic also is part owner of one of the top quarter horse stallions in the world, Corona Cartel. In

addition, he has a stable of four other race horses, four brood mares in foal and three thoroughbreds currently racing.

Being fortunate enough to own a horse as talented as Spit Curl might be a fluke, but Lepic's passion for horses is not, said his wife, Polly. He has a keen business sense, and the success and health of his horses is a driving force behind decisions he makes, she said.

But don't for a second think he's in it only for the money. She'll set you straight.

"When Spit Curl won this past weekend in Dallas, it was such an incredible win," Polly said. "She beat all these strong, masculine boy horses and she was the smallest horse in the whole race. After we'd been in the winner's circle and after we'd been to the barn to see her, I said, 'Tom, do you realize she just made (this much money)?' And he said, 'I didn't even think about that. I don't even care what she made. That was just amazing.'

"You're not in the horse racing business to lose money; that's for sure," she said. "But that's not what's driving him when he makes a decision about racing a horse."

Lepic is in contact daily with his trainers and jockeys to decide the next step for racing Spit Curl and his other horses, in addition to making decisions at the breeding farm.

"It's an actual full-time business for me in addition to what I do here," he said. "It's not a hobby, and if you're in the race horse business for a hobby, you usually don't stay in for very long because of the cost. So it's something that when I retire from being a real estate owner and broker, it will be my full-time business."

However, Spit Curl's success on the track has already created a new opportunity for Lepic's future in the business. Because of her proven racing ability, Spit Curl's offspring will be valuable and probably quite talented as well. Next year, Lepic plans to begin breeding her with Corona Cartel, pulling an embryo from Spit Curl in January, and another one in February, and placing them in surrogate mares. This means Spit Curl can return to the track later in the spring, right where her jockey, David Brown, says she belongs.

"This filly's just phenomenal, just how she runs every time," Brown said. "She goes in the gates, she looks down the track, she leads in front of the horses. Other than keeping her attention down there by the finish line, she's mostly doing all of the work. The main thing I do is keep her running and keep her mind on it.

"She puts 110 percent out on the race track," Brown said. "I'd far say she's the best horse I've ever ridden."



Tom Lepic and Spit Curl Diva, at home in Iowa

As for Lepic, his passion for the sport, his love for the horses and his acumen as a businessman: "Tom's a good guy to train for. We kind of put two and two together to make four," Brown said.

"He's got a good horse. He deserves every bit of it."

Securing a world championship isn't a done deal just yet. First, Spit Curl will race Nov. 19 in New Orleans at the national championship for fillies and mares. Winning that race, Lepic said, will assuredly earn Spit Curl the title of World Champion Aged Mare and give her a probable 75 percent chance of being named overall world champion whether or not she races for the title Dec. 11 in Los Alamitos, Calif.

Whether she'll run there still is undecided because only three weeks and a distance of more than 2,000 miles separate the two races. It's twice as far as Spit Curl has ever traveled.

To transport her by trailer and have her ready to race won't be possible, Lepic

said. He and his partner worked this week to find private jet available to fly her and expect an answer any day.

"We've got to first and foremost do what's best for her even though that race is worth a lot of money. We're not going to run her unless we feel she can do her best and have an opportunity to win," he said.

If Spit Curl wins in New Orleans but doesn't make the trip to Los Alamitos, Lepic said there's still a chance she'll be named overall world champion based on her performance this year. She has won at five different distances: 250, 300, 350, 400 and 440 -- something no other quarter horse has ever done. Of those five races, four were track records, including one in August at Prairie Meadows in Altoona that had stood for more than 22 years. Her total winnings, year to date, are \$638,438.

In her career, Spit Curl has raced 28 times, including 15 wins, 8 second-place finishes and two thirds.

World rankings released Thursday by the American Quarter Horse Association list Spit Curl as the No. 1 mare and No. 5 horse overall.

No matter the outcome at New Orleans or Los Alamitos - or even in future years with other horses - Lepic already considers himself a lucky man.

"I think in any business or any sport, your success comes from the type of work you put into it," he said. "Hopefully she won't be the last, but if she is, that's OK because there aren't many people in the sport that ever have a horse like her."