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WRITERS UP

STRONACH: BIG OPERATION. BIGGER HEART

By Bill Finley
Special to ESPN

Frank Stronach is known for being a demanding, profit-driven businessman, which doesn't exactly conjure images of compassion or warmth. But there's obviously a soft side to the owner, breeder and racetrack operator buried somewhere beneath the tough veneer. He is someone who cares about the animal and is determined to do the right thing by his horses once they are done racing. To be owned by Frank Stronach all but guarantees a horse a safe, happy and healthy retirement.

"Taking care of their retirees is a major priority for the Stronach family," said Mike Rogers, the business manager for Stronach's Adena Springs breeding operation. "This is something that is not financially beneficial to anyone. It is all about the love of the animal, caring for the animal and believing that you have a responsibility to them."

The Stronachs have always been interested in the welfare of their retirees, which includes hundreds of horses who have either been gelded or have not done well enough on the racetrack to become sires or broodmares. But, over the last 18 months, they have taken extraordinary strides to see that no Stronach-owned horse is neglected or sent to slaughter once their racing careers are over. The Stronachs have set up two facilities, one in Florida and another in Ontario, to care for and rehabilitate their retired horses.

Stronach races some of the most talented and best-bred horses in the world, but not every one of his horses is a success story. Those who have injuries that preclude them from racing or those who simply aren't cutting it on the racetrack won't be allowed to slip through the cracks or slide down a slippery slope that too often leads to the slaughterhouse.

Rather, they will be sent to one of the retirement farms, where they will be evaluated. If they are reasonably sound, they will eventually wind up at the farm in Aurora, Ontario, which is part of Stronach's Adena Springs North operation. There, Stacie Clark, a former jockey, retrains the horses so that they can be adopted as show or pleasure horses.

"We've had a retirement area at our Adena South operation for about four years," Rogers said. "What happened is that, because of the sheer numbers, we knew we had to take things to the next level. We can't just put all these horses in a paddock and let them hang out. We knew we had to do more, which is why we started the retirement and rehabilitation facility at Adena North and looked to adopt out these horses."

Those who are not suitable for adoption may remain in Florida, but they will be given a permanent home.

Since the fall of 2005, Clark, who is Rogers's wife, has found homes for 42 retirees. Stronach's wife, Frieda, is heavily involved with the retirement program and no one is given a Stronach horse without her going over and approving the adoption application. She makes sure that none of their horses fall into the wrong hands.

As is the case with most high-profile owners, some of the Stronach horses will end up in claiming races and wind up in someone else's stable. Once that happens, there is no guarantee that the horse will be given a proper retirement, but the Stronach family tries to keep tabs on as many of its former runners as possible. That's what happened with All Firmed Up. A stakes winner for Stronach, he was later claimed away and wound up running in mid-level claimers. After he was pulled up and returned lame in a 1999 claimer for new connections, the Stronachs bought him back and retired him. For him, life is now good.

"He's never had a saddle on him since that last race," Clark said.

Some might argue that Stronach can afford to do this. But so can a lot of others in horse racing and few do. Horses who wind up in the slaughterhouses may come directly from some of the sport's lower-tier tracks, but a lot of them once raced at places like Santa Anita, Saratoga and Belmont and were bred and/or owned at one time by some of the wealthiest and most prominent people in the sport. Why can't more feel the way Stronach does, that owners and breeders have a responsibility to care for the horses who ran their hearts out for them?

"I remember seeing an ad one time for a New York Racing Association adoption foundation and it said, 'We look after our own and wouldn't it be nice if everyone else did too,'" Clark said. "I think that's exactly it: it's good to set an example and it's important to remember that we're all in this industry because we love horses. To desert these horses when they no longer have any monetary value just isn't right."

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