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Hugo Dittfach

Chasing a dream

By COLIN GIBSON
Herald Sports Editor

'Intense' might be the best way to describe the race-rider - provided, of course, he is in a good mood.

The man's intensity, in relation to his sport and his outlook on life, can be slightly intimidating. It is the mark of the man.

He wouldn't want to be perceived in any other light as he nears the end of his quest.

Jockey Hugo Dittfach is about to enter the realm of legends in the world of thoroughbred racing.

As this story is written, Dittfach had ridden proudly into the winner's circle 3,996 times. He intends to achieve the magical 4,000 pinnacle and then retire from active riding.

Only 20 riders in the recorded history of thoroughbred racing have achieved this mark of excellence and Dittfach would take his place alongside Willie Shoemaker, Bill Hartack, Eddie Arcaro and Johnny Longden.

Dittfach is in his 33rd season of thoroughbred race-riding. A testament not only to his determination, but also his will to succeed.

He freely admits that this 'will to succeed' has been the driving force in his life.

At 53 years of age, and looking 10 years younger, Dittfach has a treasure trove of memories. Some, like Pandora's Box, are better left unopened.

Born in what is now West Germany, Dittfach, along with his mother, sister and brother, was interned by the Russians for three years in Poland following the Second World War. His father had served in the German army.

On his release from the internment camp, Dittfach weighed 48 pounds. He weighed 115 pounds when he entered the camp.

Dittfach's father brought the family to Canada in 1953 and settled in Calgary.

Slight of build but husky (he stands 4'11½" tall and weighs 110 pounds) Dittfach was a busboy in a

Calgary restaurant earning \$29.50 a week when a friend put the idea in his mind that he could make a lot of money as a jockey.

No stranger to animals (he had been born on farm) Dittfach decided to pursue the suggestion.

The idea also appealed to his ego, in the sense that success - or failure - would rest on his own shoulders. And he was determined to succeed.

He walked through the gates of Calgary's Victoria Park racetrack and his career in thoroughbred racing was under way - with a slight delay.

For three years he performed every job imaginable around the racetrack and earned the rich sum of \$50 a month.

In 1956 he was offered a chance to ride in a race and, as the cliché goes, he never looked back.

In his first race, his horse placed third and Dittfach won his second race.

His career has taken him around the world - several times - and he has accrued his share of honors, as well as stories.

He reports that renowned bandleader Harry James once wanted to buy his contract and his first two wins on California tracks were on horses owned by legendary screen star Betty Grable.

In every racing venue in which he has competed, Dittfach has garnered top honors.

He topped the jockey standings in Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, then moved to Ontario and Woodbine racetrack in 1958.

He was the top jockey in Canada in 1961, with 195 wins and won the Queen's Plate that year aboard Blue Light.

In 1965 he once again finished on top of the Canadian jockey standings with 177 wins.

Dittfach has resided on the Eighth Line, south of Georgetown for 23 years and also owns property in Calgary.

Once the magical 4,000 win number is attained, he plans on



RIDE LIKE THE WIND. Hugo Dittfach faces the challenge of a race as he faces the challenge of life. Success is what counts and second-best is just not good enough. He is within reach of 4,000 wins in thoroughbred racing, a pinnacle achieved only by

legends in the sport. He doesn't consider himself a legend, only a man dedicated to his chosen sport and determined to be remembered as a race-rider who gave his all every time the starter's bell rang. (Photo submitted)

becoming a trainer and, hopefully, one day owning and racing his own string of horses.

He claims the highlight of his racing career was winning his first race, but also mentions that he was selected to the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame in 1983.

Asked if there is a possibility that his training venture might not succeed, Dittfach's demeanor suddenly changes and with a flinty glare declares, "It will succeed." - end of conversation on this topic.

In describing himself and his longevity - not to mention success - in thoroughbred racing, Dittfach states simply, "I was determined to be someone... to belong. I admit

I might seem driven, but there is a need inside me to be successful, at everything I do. I'm also a man of my word."

Divorced now, after a 20-year marriage, Dittfach has two sons and two daughters - each successful in their own right.

His oldest daughter, Michelle, teaches in Arizona and a second daughter, Rosemarie is attending high school.

His oldest son, Hugo Jr., works for Rockwell International, while the younger son, Eric, attends college in Arizona.

Dittfach is involved in what he terms "a serious relation" with apprentice jockey Jessica Devlin and

although there is a large difference in their ages, according to Dittfach, "It's the relationship that counts."

The 4,000 win will come to Hugo Dittfach - of that there is no doubt.

Then, there will be other worlds to conquer. Should anyone doubt that Dittfach might falter along the way, one suggestion - don't bet against him.

A wiser investment might involve betting on a horse race.



E.P. TAYLOR, a legend in Canadian thoroughbred racing, presents Hugo Dittfach with a commemorative plate celebrating the jockey's 2500th win. Now deceased, Taylor is remembered by Ditt-

fach as a man with vision in thoroughbred racing in Canada and one who deserves the lion's share of the credit for the success the "Sport of Kings" is now realizing nation-wide. (Photo submitted)



A LITTLE HORSE SENSE goes a long way in terms of a jockey's success. In his 20s, Hugo Dittfach was still learning the ropes of his chosen trade and most certainly wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Especially, when the horse's mouth was so close. (Photo submitted)