

Magnificent DUO

Olena Oak and Ron Emmons win back-to-back Magnificent 7 All-Around Stock Horse Championships.

By Stephanie Duquette • Action photos by Kathy Higgins

It is one of the most exciting and spectator friendly showcases for the all-around cow horse: the Magnificent 7, a four-event test of herd work, reining, roping and fence work ability. Held June 8 – 10, in conjunction with the annual Western States Horse Expo in Sacramento, Calif., the “Mag 7” attracted some of the top riders and bridle horses in the business.

Similar in format to the National Reined Cow Horse Association’s World’s Greatest Horseman, the Magnificent 7 showcases the skill and versatility of the kind of mount every horseman wants—one that can slide, spin, cut a cow, go down the fence and work the end of a rope. The preliminary round whittled the field of 12 entries to the top seven finalists, who competed for their share of a \$35,810 jackpot Friday, June 10.

For the second year in a row, Olena Oak (Smart Chic Olena x Fritzs Oak E Doakie x Doc’s Oak), piloted by Ione, Calif., horseman, Ron Emmons, brought home the Magnificent 7 Championship for the 9-year-old stallion’s owners Mel Smith and Nichole Scott. The win paid \$10,024, elevating Olena Oak’s star-studded career earnings to \$232,581, according to **Equi-Stat**.

Emmons and the blaze-faced sorrel stallion, nicknamed “Ernie,”

dominated the Magnificent 7 competition, winning both the preliminary round and the Championship. The reliable performer was at the top of his game, and he needed every ounce of his grit and cow sense to handle some rude, fractious cattle. The testy bunch kept the herd scores low on finals night – Emmons and Doug Williamson, who piloted Hes Wright On to the Magnificent 7 Reserve Championship, tied for the high herd score with a modest 141 each.

“The cattle were really tough out of the herd both days. But on finals night the cattle were really bad. Really bad,” Emmons said. “They were bad down the fence too, so you just had to survive and be consistent. They’d run over you. They’d outrun you to the sides.



Last year’s defending Magnificent 7 Champions, Olena Oak and Ron Emmons, won the title for the second consecutive year.

They were just kind of wild, and no respect for the horse. It was quite entertaining!”

In the second event, the reined work, Williamson and Hes Wright On took over the lead, scoring a round-winning 146.5 to Emmons and Olena Oak’s 143. But Williamson had trouble in phase three, the steer-stopping, where a misplaced throw of the rope resulted in a disappointing 137 score. Emmons and “Ernie” won the steer-stopping round with a 147, and then topped the results sheet again with a 144 in the final test, the fence work.

“He was just very consistent. I think that’s what I have to say the

most about the horse through the whole show. He was pretty much just there. He wasn’t cheating me; he was honest the whole time. And the other guys all had a little hiccup somewhere,” Emmons said.

The California trainer, who has accumulated \$755,605 in career earnings since **Equi-Stat** recorded his first paycheck in 1991, started riding Olena Oak in 2006, when the stallion was 4. The dynamic duo has racked up numerous wins and top placings, including consecutive American Quarter Horse Association Working Cow Horse World Championships in 2007 and 2008. They were Reserve at

The riders faced extra-tough cattle in the finals. Olena Oak and Ron Emmons (right) and the Reserve Champion, Hes Wright On, shown by Doug Williamson, tied for the high scoring herd work with only a 141.

the 2009 Magnificent 7, tied for Reserve World's Greatest Horseman in February in San Angelo, Texas, and won the National Stock Horse Association Classic Bridle Spectacular Championship the last two years in a row.

"I think he [Olena Oak] is getting better as he's getting older. He's only 9, and you'd think he's older than that for what he's done. He's just like a good old rope horse – they don't get good until they're 9 or 10 years old, and that's the way he feels. He feels like he's just getting better and better. He really has come on strong and become a good cutter. He always has been a good fence horse and a good reiner, and the roping is a pretty solid spot for him too," Emmons said.

Olena Oak's first foals arrived in 2007, and Emmons said the champion stallion will continue doing double duty in the breeding shed and the show pen, with no retirement in the foreseeable future. "As long as we can win the big prizes on him and he's sound, and sound of mind, it'd be a waste of a good horse to put him up," he said.

The Reserve Champion, Hes Wright On (Lenas Wright On x Shesa Lota Nic x Reminic), owned by Garth and Amanda Gardiner of Gardiner Quarter Horses, Ashland, Kans., also has proven himself a worthy all-around competitor. The 8-year-old stallion, shown by NRCHA Hall of Fame horseman, Williamson, Bakersfield, Calif., earned \$7,876 for the Reserve placing, elevating his winnings past the \$147,000 mark, according to **Equi-Stat**.

The Gardiners purchased Hes Wright On in 2008, the year Williamson guided the bay stallion to the NRCHA Stakes and NRCHA Derby Reserve Championships. In 2010, the powerhouse pair claimed Reserve at the World's Greatest Horseman and won the NSHA World's Richest Stock Horse Championship. Williamson, 69, a two-time Snaffle Bit Futurity Champion, continues to work his way toward \$1 million rider status – his career wins add up to \$914,865, according to **Equi-Stat**.



The Magnificent 7 Reserve Championship placing put Hes Wright On's earnings over the \$147,000 mark.

The Magnificent 7 event's history goes back nearly 40 years. It is a resurrected version of a competition called the World's Championship All-Around Stock Horse Contest, launched in the 1970's by renowned horseman Bobby Ingersoll, with support from Pro Rodeo Hall of Famer's Cotton Rosser and Walt Rodman. Although that original competition faded away over time, the notion of an all-around, four-event cow horse show had taken hold. In 2002, the concept was revived and the Magnificent 7 became a huge crowd favorite event at the Western States Horse Expo.

Magnificent 7 finals night takes on the feel of a rock concert, with outdoor bleachers brimming with enthusiastic onlookers who aren't shy about making noise for their favorites. The finely tuned bridle horses, produced by years of meticulous training, deserve more showcase opportunities like the Magnificent 7, with even bigger prizes, according to Emmons.

"We should be winning \$100,000 purses on our bridle horses," he said, referring to the \$100,000 NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity Championship check awarded annually to a 3-year-old horse. "It's the ultimate goal of riding babies, to get them into the bridle and make them a bridle horse. In the old

vaquero tradition, there was not as much emphasis on the snaffle bit horse or the hackamore horse as there is the bridle horse."

The modern reined cow horse is geared toward a 3-, 4- and 5-year-old show career because those futurity and derby events offer the richest prizes, Emmons observed.

"Business dictates we do that, because that's where the money is. And I'm not saying that's good or bad or anything else, but the ultimate, traditional vaquero would want to see a bridle horse."

Real cowboy, real champion

Ron Emmons, born and raised in the central California coastal town of Lompoc, grew up with a rope and reins in his hands. He spent most of his time on the Santa Ynez, Calif., ranch where his family worked, honing his horsemanship and roping skills in challenging terrain.

"It's not flat country. That coastal range is pretty steep, pretty brushy. Pretty rough country. A lot of people wouldn't think that, being out on the coast of California, but it is. That's where I got my start," he said.

As a kid, Emmons team roped and worked alongside the cowboys as they doctored, branded and gathered. Among his mentors

were some true masters of the traditional vaquero horse training techniques.

"There's a guy by the name of Joe Cabral who is probably one of the best horsemen I ever knew just off a ranch. He had good hackamore horses, good spade-bit horses, and did a lot of work on the ranches. Funny story about him – he'd never been any further north than San Luis Obispo, or any further south than Santa Barbara [about 100 miles apart]. That's all the further he'd ever been. He worked on the Hollister Ranch when he was a young guy with Vincentio Ortega, Luis Ortega's brother. Lot of good old Spanish cowboys. There's a lot of heritage there in that area, the vaquero style. That's what I grew up on."

When Emmons was about 30, he realized he "didn't take direction very well," and decided to go into business for himself. Drawn to the recreational industry, he briefly considered selling boats.

"And then I got to messing around with a few guys that trained horses and I thought, 'I can do that.'"

Emmons' early professional career focused on Paint horses, and he won multiple American Paint Horse Association World Championships in reining and working cow horse. In 1995, he was the National Reining Horse Association Futurity Limited Open Reserve Champion aboard Just Plain Doin It (Just Plain Colonel x Reminics Bar Girl x Reminic), and was 10th in the Futurity Open riding Miss Tivio Silver (Strait Silver x Miss Peppy Tivio x Peppy San).

Since 2004, Emmons has focused exclusively on reined cow horse competition. In 2005, he won his first of three Magnificent 7 Championships with Roo Star (Gallo Del Cielo x Anna Paulena x Doc O'Lena). In 2010, he became only the second rider to sweep the Magnificent 7 Championship and Reserve Championship, piloting Olena Oak to the win and Matt Dillon Dun It (Hollywood Dun It x Rosalie Dillon x Kemars Bar Chex) to Reserve.

Emmons operates his training facility in Lone, Calif., with his wife, LaDonna. —SD